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PEYOTE PISTOLEERS

A FAST ACTION MYSTERY THRILLER

By WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD

• • •

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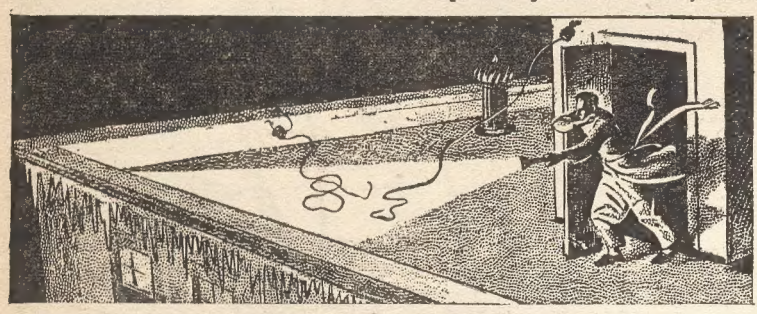

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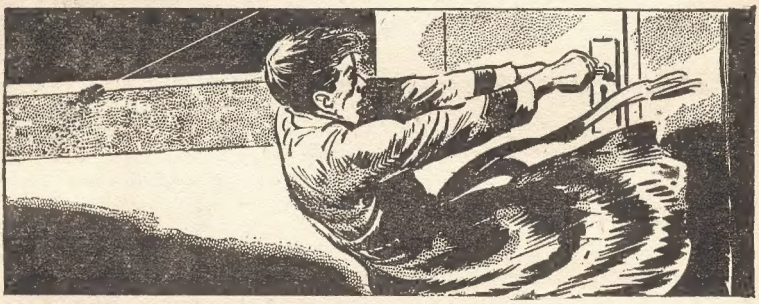

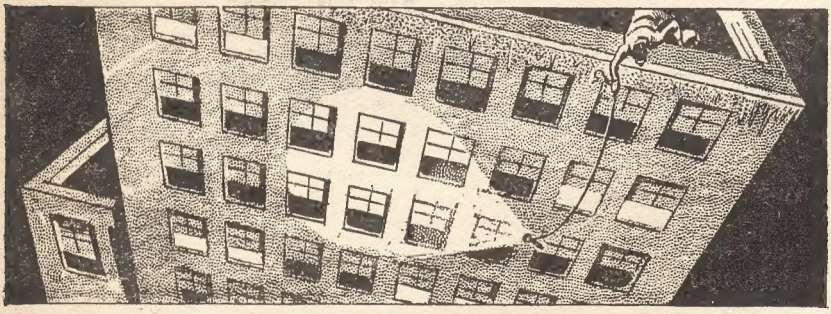

"NEARLY FROZEN TO DEATH, I had an inspiration. Ripping the aerial loose, I tied the lighted flashlight to it, and swung it over the side of the building. Luckily the light attracted someone in an apartment below. Thanks to those dependable 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries I was saved.

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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The Roundup

EVEN though our friend, Harold N. Coriell, of Newton, New Jersey, thinks we've published too many "fantastic tales" during recent months, his letter indicates that he still thinks pretty highly of Western Story. Here's Mr. Coriell's letter:

"I have been a reader of Western Story magazine for over ten years, and enjoy the comments by readers who write in to the editor. Like a recent correspondent, it strikes me that there have been an excess of fantastic tales in recent months; stories lacking in the real atmosphere of the Old West, and better fitted for the so-called thriller magazines.

"While all tastes are not alike, even among Western Story fans, still it seems reasonable to suppose that your readers crave yarns of the Old West, the Pioneer West, rather than weird tales or detective yarns whose locale just happens to be in the West. As an example of the stories I like to read in Western Story, may I mention 'Suicide Trail,' by W. Ryerson Johnson, in the December 14th issue. Give us more of the kind featuring the West in the days of Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, and of the days of the great cattle drives; the kind of yarns that Clarence E. Mulford and Zane Grey used to write.

"While it will cost you more to get the products of the best writers, is there any law that forbids your getting a higher price for Western Story? Personally, I would willingly pay fifteen cents per copy, or twenty cents, in order to get the best and escape the more trashy. However, this is just my own opinion, and may not coincide with that of the majority of your readers. At any rate, keep on trying to make Western Story the best in its field, and more power to you."

Thanks a lot for writing in, Mr. Coriell, and we'll do our best to always keep W. S. tops in its field.

Coming next week—MONTANA REP, a thrill-packed novel of avenging night riders, by Walt Coburn. When Rafe Walker joined the hardcase Square & Compass crew, he was tagged as one more hungry-loop brush popper in a country where the only law was the kind that came out of lead-spouting sixes. Would he live long enough to discover who was back of the rustling combine that was cleaning the range of its beef? Don't miss this red-blooded story of cow-country adventure in the next Western Story—it's only one of a top string of yarns.

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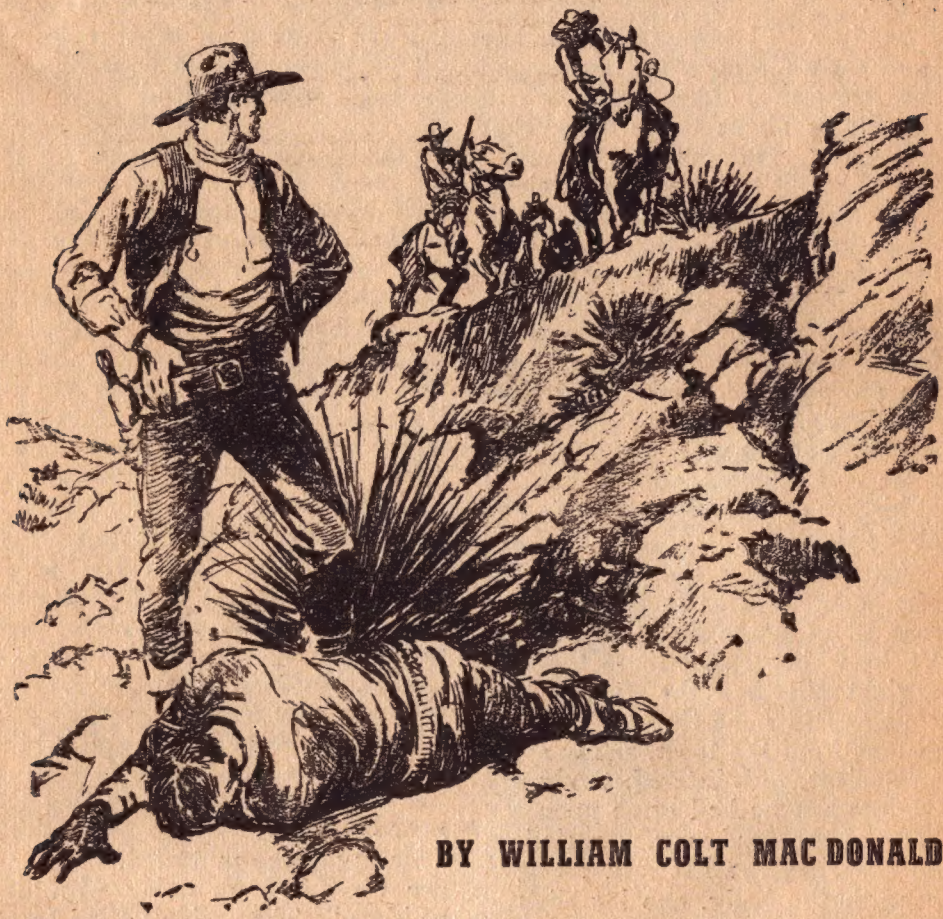

BY WILLIAM COLT MACDONALD

Part One

CHAPTER I

TWO-HANDED MYSTERY

THERE were several things about the dead man that interested Lance Tolliver, but mostly it was the cold, stiffened hands that drew his attention. The right hand, even to the fingernails, had been painted a brownish-black as far as the wrist. The left was clutched tightly—almost fiercely, as though determined to retain the object at all costs—around an article of desert plant life

known in parts of the Southwest as the mescal button. No doubt about its being a mescal button; Tolliver could see the thick, carrotlike root, with bits of sandy earth still clinging to it, protruding from the firmly clenched hand. Even a bit of the bluish-green flattened top was visible between the thumb and forefinger.

Tolliver had been in the saddle from early morning, having crossed the Mexican border to return to the States about two o'clock that afternoon. He was a lean, rangy man of about twenty-seven or eight, with good features and gray eyes. A dusty sombrero that had once been fawn-colored covered his unruly reddish hair. His denim overalls were clean, though somewhat faded, with wide cuffs just above the ankles of his high-heeled cowman boots. His woolen shirt fitted smoothly across wide shoulders, and there was a blue bandanna knotted at his throat. A Colt's .45 was slung at his right hip.

After crossing the border that afternoon, Tolliver had headed his roan pony in the direction of Pozo Verde, which wasn't more than six or eight miles from the Mexican line. He was still some three miles or so distant from the town, riding along an ancient, rock-littered, sandy dry wash, when he had come upon the body of the dead man, sprawled on its left side, the left arm cramped beneath the body, one leg slightly drawn up. Tolliver had immediately checked his horse, dismounted a short distance away and approached the still form to make a closer survey.

There was an ugly black hole just beneath the dead man's right cheek bone. Dried blood streaked his face and had run up into the iron-gray hair. Tolliver could find no sign of his hat about.

Flies buzzed in the afternoon heat. Overhead, a buzzard wheeled in a wide circle, dropping lower, then at a movement from Tolliver again lifted toward the higher reaches of the cloudless sky. Tolliver's normally firm lips tightened still more as he studied intently the features of the corpse. After a moment he drew a clean bandanna from a pocket and spread it over the dead face.

STOOPING carefully close to the body, Tolliver pried open the rigid fingers of the left hand. It took quite an effort to get possession of the mescal button, so tightly were the cold fingers clenched about the spongy top of the plant, but Tolliver finally straightened up with the little plant in his hand. Root and all, it wasn't more than four inches long. The top of the plant was circular, about an inch thick and two inches across, with tiny lines, or indentations, running from the top center to the earth line at the sides. Spaced at regular intervals on the segments formed by these lines were tiny, woollike tufts. A pinkish cast showed through the bluish-green surface of the plant.

Tolliver frowned as he studied the object in his hand, looked again at the dead man before thrusting the mescal button inside his shirt. "Hm-m-m!" he muttered. "I wonder what *he* was doing with dry whiskey." There didn't seem to be any immediate reply to that question. The dead man's six-shooter was still in its holster, Tolliver noticed next. That made the business look like murder.

There were two buzzards soaring overhead by this time, their wheeling, dipping gyrations forming black patterns against the turquoise sky.

To the west rose the high, serrated peaks of the Saddlestring Mountains, their ravines and hollows etched clearly in brilliant desert light. Here in the dry wash the way was littered with boulders of all sizes and shapes. The nearby slopes were covered with brush at some spots, sandy, gravelly soil at others. Here and there among the brush were clumps of cholla and prickly pear. A few yuccas with the stalks of last spring's blossoms showing brown and dry dotted the landscape.

Tolliver spoke his thoughts half aloud: "I'd judge he was killed last night sometime. Now, I wonder—"

Without waiting to complete the words, he stepped back from the corpse and began to circle around, scrutinizing the earth closely as he moved. There were prints to be seen in the sandy bed of the dry wash, prints showing that three riders had arrived at this spot—at least there were the prints of three horses. The sandy soil was too loose to leave definite impressions, though to a keen understanding eye like Lance Tolliver's certain details were clear. Back at the body again, Tolliver found blurry footprints.

"They came out here," he muttered, "from the direction of Pozo Verde. When they left, they went back the same way. One horse left considerably later than the others, though. Why?"

He knelt near the corpse, closely studying the man's clothing—woolen shirt, denim overalls, boots and spurs. Again and again his puzzled gaze returned to that black-painted hand. He stooped close and sniffed the atmosphere in the vicinity of the hand. After a time, he went back to the high-heeled boots once more. Several minutes slipped past while he was lost in deep concentration.

SO intense were Tolliver's meditative speculations that the riders were almost upon him before he realized it. Then, as his ear caught the thudding of running hoofs and creaking of saddle leather, he straightened up to await the arrival of whoever was coming. A big gray horse with a rider wearing a law officer's star was first to pull to a halt on the edge of the dry wash. Then, in quick succession, five other riders drew alongside the first man. A look of surprise swept across six faces as they glanced down into the wash and saw Tolliver and the dead man. Almost immediately the faces went hard. Hands moved toward guns, but no one spoke for a moment.

Tolliver broke the silence: "Mr. Sheriff, it looks like you'd arrived at a good time."

The big man with the sheriff's star grunted. "Maybe I didn't arrive soon enough." He was middle-aged, grizzled, sharp-eyed, with a close-cropped gray mustache. He pushed back the big black sombrero from his forehead and repeated meaningly: "Maybe I didn't arrive soon enough. That man dead?"

"That's my opinion," Tolliver said easily. "Maybe you'd better examine him yourself."

"Exactly what I'm aimin' to do," the sheriff said tight-lipped.

The other men were talking now, all offering advice to the sheriff. He spoke sharply over one shoulder without removing his eyes from Tolliver and told them to keep their advice to themselves.

"If you and your riders are coming down into this wash," Tolliver said, "it might be a good idea to come on foot and move careful. You wouldn't want to mess up the sign."

"That's good advice," the sheriff conceded, "though I don't know as I need it."

He and the others dismounted and started down into the wash.

A new voice broke in: "I don't reckon we're going to waste time looking for sign. I guess we've got our man."

The sheriff nodded. "You might be right, Chiricahua."

Tolliver was silent, though he didn't like the manner in which things were shaping up. He glanced at the man named Chiricahua and saw a well-built individual with a swarthy, hawklike face and beady eyes. A beaded hatband encircled the man's flat-topped sombrero, and he wore tight Oregon breeches. His lips were thin and cruel. A braided horsehair quirt dangled from his left wrist. The six-shooter at his hip looked as though it had received plenty of use. The remaining men, all dressed in cowboy togs, were an unprepossessing lot. All were armed.

TOLLIVER stepped back as the men approached the still form on the rock-littered floor of the wash. The sheriff lifted the bandanna from the face of the corpse, then, after a moment, replaced it and moved back. He seemed to be the only one of the group with sense enough to step carefully so as not to disturb any "sign" that might be present, and voiced a warning to the others to walk prudently. "Mind what I'm telling you," he added.

"This wash is too sandy to leave much sign anyway," one of the men said. "See?" He scuffed one booted toe across the loose sandy soil. "Sheriff, this won't hardly hold any sign. There ain't no use trying to read tracks—"

"I'm the best judge of that," the lawman said shortly.

"Sheriff, your man has already messed up some sign," Tolliver put in. "Suppose I tell you what I've found out—"

"What you already made up, you mean," sneered the man who had scraped his foot through the sand. "It don't go down, feller. I reckon we don't need to search any farther for the killer."

Tolliver ignored the man, and continued to the sheriff: "I figure the killing occurred sometime last night. Three horses came out from the direction of Pozo Verde; three returned that way. There was some boot prints around the body, but nothing much could be made of 'em. However—"

"Exactly the point I'm making," said the man who had messed up the boot prints. "Sheriff, we've got our man. The two of 'em probably had a fight, and this hombre gunned him out—"

"Kilby," the sheriff interrupted sarcastically, "I've managed to run Sartoris County a long spell now, without help from you. When I need any assistance or advice, I'll let you know."

The man named Kilby reddened and fell silent.

"Hey," Chiricahua cried, "look at Bowman's hand. It's painted black!"

The sheriff grunted. "I already noted that. Don't understand it no more than you do." He wheeled abruptly on Tolliver. "I figure you'll explain it."

Tolliver shook his head. "I don't know any more about that painted hand of Bowman's—if that's the dead man's name—than you do."

"If I'm convinced of that, I ain't saying so," the sheriff said dourly. "You might be speaking truth; again, you might not. Speaking of names, what's yours?" He came a step nearer the other.

"Tolliver—Lance Tolliver."

"So?" the sheriff jerked out. His eyes hardened a trifle. "I suppose Lance stands for Lancelot."

There was some raucous laughter from the other men. Tolliver's tanned features flushed a trifle. "You're supposing correct," he said quietly.

"Cowman, I take it," the sheriff said curtly.

"You're right again."

"I usually am," the law officer drawled. "Where you heading for?"

"Pozo Verde."

"Why?"

"Figured to get a job with some cow outfit."

The sheriff smiled thinly. "I reckon you might as well postpone that for a spell. What did you kill Frank Bowman for?"

"Now, look here, sheriff," Tolliver exclaimed; "if you think I had anything to do with this killing, you're mistaken—"

"What say we string the coyote up?" Kilby interrupted.

The sheriff nodded. "Maybe that's a suggestion, but it will have to be done legal. Kilby, I told you once to keep out of my affairs. If you want to be useful, you might remove this Tolliver's—if that's his name—belt and gun."

Kilby jerked his own six-shooter and approached Tolliver. "Stick 'em high, hombre!" he growled. "I'm relieving you of your hardware."

THERE was no use resisting. Fighting down the indignant words that rose to his lips, Tolliver remained silent. He didn't put his arms in the air, merely held them well out from his sides, while Kilby unbuckled his cartridge belt, then, at the sheriff's order, buckled it again and hung it over the lawman's shoulder.

The sheriff's eyes were boring into Tolliver's. "Where you been all day?" he demanded.

"On the trail, heading for Pozo Verde," Tolliver replied. "If you want the whole story, I've been down in Mexico and—"

"What were you doing in Mexico?" the sheriff cut in.

"Just riding around, looking at country I've never seen before."

"Hm-m-m!" The sheriff's short grunt sounded skeptical. "I'd bet dollars to doughnuts you won't be able to prove that."

The lawman's manner was commencing to get under Tolliver's skin. "Maybe I'll do more than that, when the right time comes," he asserted coldly.

"Hah!" the sheriff jerked out. "Tough hombre, eh? I reckon we'll have to take that out of you—"

"You'll live to regret it if you try to take anything out of me," Tolliver warned him. "I've told you my business, given you my name. That's more than you've done."

The sheriff laughed sarcastically. "Asking for an introduction, are you? Well, Mr. Tough Hombre, if you must know, I'm Ethan Lockwood, sheriff of Sartoris County. These fellers with me are known as Chiricahua Herrick, George Kilby, Bert Ridge, Larry Johnson and Luke Ordway. Don't expect 'em to shake hands with you. They don't like murderers—"

"I tell you I didn't kill Bowman—" Tolliver protested.

"Don't lie to me," Lockwood said savagely. "I want the truth. What was the idea? Did Bowman have some money you wanted? Come across. What was the quarrel between you two?"

"Hey, sheriff," Kilby suggested, "supposin' I search him?"

"I'll 'tend to that myself, later," Lockwood scowled. "And I'll do all

the talking too, so keep your mouth shut. One way or t'other we're going to make this Lance Tolliver tell why he killed Frank Bowman. C'mon, feller—speak up!"

Lance grinned. "I thought you were going to do *all* the talking, sheriff."

Lockwood's features crimsoned. "Now don't get too smart for your own good, Tolliver," he advised ominously.

"A six-gun barrel bent over his conk," Chiricahua Herrick growled, "might act as a primer on his talk. What say, sheriff?"

Lockwood shook his head. "If there's to be any gun whuppings handed out, I'll do it myself. I just reckon we'll take this murderin' sidewinder in to my jail and prefer the usual charges—"

"You're not arresting me," Lance interrupted.

"Suit yourself," Lockwood said coldly. "Put up a fight, if you like, and see what happens to you. Maybe that would be best. I always like to save my taxpayers the cost of a trial when it can be done. Now, are you coming gentle or aren't you?"

Lance's gaze shifted quickly about the half ring of men confronting him. Three of them already had their hands on gun butts. The sheriff eyed him sardonically.

Lance relaxed. "All right, I'll come without a fuss," he said quietly, "but I'm protesting this arrest—"

"Protest all you want to," Lockwood cut in. "There ain't been a killing in my county in six months, and I don't aim to have any murderer escape me now. You'll learn I have a rep for bringing criminals to justice and—"

"If we're headed for your blasted jail, let's go," Lance interrupted. "I'm not honing to stand here and listen to a tinhorn political speech any longer than I have to."

"Still feeling tough, eh?" Lockwood snorted. "Well, once I get you in Pozo Verde you'll get over that fast. That roan gelding over there yours?"

Tolliver nodded.

"Get on it and don't give me any of your lip," Lockwood commanded. "Chiricahua, get a piggin' string and tie his hands to the saddlehorn. You, Ordway, stay here with the body until the coroner can come out and view it. And don't touch that body—not none. I want it left just the way it is until Doc Drummond gets here."

Tolliver was roped into his saddle, then his pony was led up out of the wash.

WITH Sheriff Lockwood on one side and Chiricahua Herrick on the other, the start was made for Pozo Verde, Tolliver riding between the two. Kilby, Ridge and Johnson fell in at the rear, leaving the man named Ordway to stay with the body until the arrival of the coroner. Kilby filled the time with a loud mouthing of threats regarding what was to happen to Tolliver, until even the sheriff could stand it no longer. In no gentle voice he ordered the man to "*pronto* quit that runnin' off at the head before somebody slaps down your ears." Kilby flushed and kept quiet from then on.

Lance remained silent during the ride to Pozo Verde, though his mind was rife with speculation. A couple of times Chiricahua Herrick tried to insist on Tolliver making a statement regarding his reasons for killing Bowman, but the prisoner just smiled coldly without answering.

"Lay off, Chiricahua," Lockwood said finally. "Once I've got this

hombre in a cell I'll get the truth or know the reason why. You just leave it to me."

By this time the sun was picking out crimson highlights on the distant peaks of the Saddlestring Mountains and the air had commenced to cool a trifle. Before long the riders reached a wagon-rutted trail running across the *campo*, and ten minutes later, topping a low ridge of ground, they spied the roofs of Pozo Verde. Following the trail, they soon commenced to see blocky adobe houses on either side. The houses became more numerous. The smoke from mesquite fires was drifting lazily in the air, and here and there lights shone from windows.

Tolliver saw, when they reached it, that Pozo Verde was quite a sizable town. A double row of hitch racks, with a scattering of ponies and wagons before them, stretched the length of Main Street, along which the riders were guiding their ponies. Yellow squares of light from store windows made rectangular patches on the dusty roadway; already it was too dark for passing pedestrians to notice that Tolliver was tied to his saddle. On either side were buildings with high false fronts. There were saloons, restaurants, a savings bank and a two-story brick hotel.

They had already crossed two intersections—Las Vegas Street and Laredo Street—and were approaching a third, Yuma Street. At the southwest corner of Yuma and Main stood a long low building of rock and adobe construction, before which swung a board sign bearing the words: "Sheriff's Office & County Jail." There was no light in the office.

"Dang it," Lockwood grunted. "I suppose that deputy of mine has gone to his supper already." He signaled the horses to a stop before the hitch rail. "Untie this gent, Chiricahua," he ordered. "He's arrived at his steel-barred apartment."

Chiricahua untied the rope that bound Tolliver's wrists, then whipped out his gun. "Get down offn that horse, hombre, and move right cautious. I'll plug you if you try a get-away!"

Lance slid down from his saddle. "How about taking care of my horse?" he suggested. "He's covered a lot of—"

Kilby sneered. "You ain't goin' to have no more need of a horse—"

"Shut up, Kilby," Lockwood growled. "I'll see your horse is watered and fed, Tolliver. Now you get on there!"

The door to the sheriff's office was open. Lance "got on there," with the barrel of Chiricahua's gun boring into his backbone.

CHAPTER II

EVIDENCE

THERE wasn't any light in the cell into which Lance was ushered. He heard the steel-barred door swing behind him, then the retreating steps down the corridor between the double row of cells. Kilby was talking again, saying something about hoping he'd have a hand on the rope when they hung Tolliver. The door to the sheriff's office slammed shut, and a moment later the door to the street closed loudly. The voices died away, leaving Lance to his own thoughts.

He fumbled around in the darkness, found a wooden bunk in which was a burlap sack filled with straw, and sat down to roll a cigarette. He could be thankful they hadn't searched him, nor taken away his tobacco and matches, anyway. He struck a match, dragged deeply on

the brown-paper cigarette, then held the match up and glanced around. The cell had one barred window in its outer wall. Lance saw that much and little more before the match flickered out.

He wasn't unduly worried about the situation. His mind dwelt more on the dead man he had found that afternoon. And there was that black-painted hand. And the mescal button. The plant still reposed inside Lance's shirt.

"There's something doggone queer about the whole setup," he muttered.

His cigarette had burned nearly to the end when he heard footsteps entering the office from the street. It suddenly occurred to Lance this was the first sound he'd heard since the sheriff and the other men had departed. It must be that all the other cells in the jail were empty. The door between the sheriff's office and the jail opened now. Light shone along the corridor between cells and a long shadow appeared on the floor.

Lance caught the gleam of the deputy sheriff's badge first, then he saw its wearer standing before the cell door, holding in one hand an oil lamp and in the other a platter of food. The food was placed on the floor while the cell door was unlocked. Then, picking up the platter, the deputy kicked open the door and stepped inside. He handed the platter to Lance, set the lamp on the floor, and turned back toward the corridor, with the explanation that he had to go back for the coffee.

Lance considered the matter while the deputy was gone. The man hadn't bothered to close the cell door. Careless or—something else? Prisoners had been known to be allowed to escape, just so they could be shot down when they emerged into the open. Lance decided not to take any chances.

THE deputy reappeared in a few moments bearing a pail of steaming coffee. Lance felt better as he commenced to eat the potatoes and roast beef and biscuits on the platter. Apparently the deputy hadn't intended him to escape.

"I understand your name is Tolliver," the deputy said. "I'm Oscar Perkins."

"Glad to know you," Lance said gravely. "This chow is sure welcome."

"I figured it might be," Perkins nodded.

There was something comical about the man. He had large bony wrists that hung well below his shirt sleeves. His black sombrero's brim was sadly tattered along one side. The skinny legs in corduroy trousers appeared to be badly warped. He had sleepy, indolent eyes and a mild manner of speech. Looking at Oscar Perkins, Lance Tolliver was reminded of nothing so much as a tall, skinny, blond scarecrow. Even the gun belt at the deputy's hips looked as though it might slip down around his knees at any instant.

Perkins produced a small paper sack from a hip pocket. "Would you like a lemon drop?" he inquired politely.

"A what?" After the day's experiences, Lance could scarcely believe his ears.

"A lemon drop." Perkins thrust the bag toward him.

"Not right now, thanks. I'll finish my supper first."

"Uh-huh. Lemon drops is right good for indigestion." Perkins seated himself across the cell, with his back resting against the wall. He shoved a couple of lemon drops into his mouth and made loud suck-

ing noises while he watched Tolliver eat. "Fact is," he added, after a time, "lemon drops is good for nigh any ailment. They offset the acidity in one's stomach."

Lance gulped. "Did I hear you right?" he ventured.

"Reckon you did. Anyway, that's what a sawbones in Kansas City told me one time. I always remembered just how he said it. Sounds genteellike, don't it?"

Lance swallowed some more coffee. "Sort of," he admitted. He changed the subject: "Seems to me like I'm the only prisoner in your jail."

"Y'are. Every crime wave in this town has been washed out for a long spell. Folks don't start things with Ethan Lockwood enforcing the law like he does. You're the first prisoner we had to entertain in a year of Sundays, seems like." Perkins crunched a lemon drop between his teeth and went on: "That's just the trouble. With crime at a minimum, the taxpayers can't see why a deputy is needed here. I reckon they figure Ethan can handle it all —and I suppose he can. Eventually, I'm going to commence to begin looking around for another job. Say, you don't look like a murderer."

"Much obliged," Lance said dryly. "Same to you. Did the sheriff tell you I was a murderer?"

Deputy Perkins shook his head. "Not for certain. As a matter of fact, after he told me to come down here and feed you—he found me in the general store getting some lemon drops—he tipped me off I was to treat you like a guest. Didn't think I heard him right at first. First time I ever knew him to act thataway. Y'ain't got anything on him, have you?"

"Not yet," Lance began grimly, "but I hope—"

The door between the sheriff's office and the jail corridor opened. The deputy said, "Here comes Ethan now." He scrambled to his feet, still holding the bag of lemon drops.

LANCE glanced at the open cell door and wondered what the sheriff would have to say regarding that oversight. Apparently Lockwood was accustomed to such happenings. He strode into the cell, saying: "Oscar, there's a lot of noise coming out of the Red Steer Saloon."

"There won't be long," the deputy drawled. "I'll go down and see can I quieten 'em a mite. See you later, Tolliver." He popped a lemon drop into his mouth, thrust the paper sack into a hip pocket, and sauntered leisurely out along the corridor.

"And how he'll quiet 'em," Lockwood chuckled. Lance had left his seat on the bunk now. The sheriff came nearer, one hand outthrust. "Reckon I owe you an apology, Tolliver."

Lance took the hand. "Thanks," he said cautiously. "You must have discovered I didn't have anything to do with the murder."

Lockwood laughed. "I knew that right along. You see, Tolliver, I had a letter from your outfit a couple of days back, telling me to be on the lookout for you and give you all assistance possible. The instant you told me your name, today, I realized who you were. Didn't know just what you were after, but figured it might be as well to put on an act for the benefit of Chiricahua Herrick and those others."

Relief flooded through Lance. He grinned a bit wryly. "You're one good actor, sheriff. You had me feeling I was in a tight for a spell. It all came as a bit of a surprise, particularly as I'd been given to

understand that Sartoris County had an honest peace officer on the job."

They sat down together on the bunk and rolled cigarettes. "Never suspected you for a moment, of course," Lockwood was saying. "But I'm not so sure that some of that gang that rode out with me today don't know more about that murder than they were letting on. Bowman's horse came wandering back to town about noon and—"

"That explains," Lance cut in, "how one of the three horses left after the others. I read that much from the sign."

Lockwood nodded. "Herrick, Kilby and a couple of others came running to me with the news that their pal, Bowman, was missing. We followed the hoofprints back toward that dry wash where we met you."

"I figured something of the kind might have brought you out," Lance said, "providing you were on the square. At the same time, I wasn't sure but what you and your riders might be looking for somebody to frame."

"Not *my* riders," the sheriff denied strenuously. "I don't ride with those hombres unless I can't help myself. It smelled fishy to me when they kept calling Bowman their pal. So far as I know, Bowman was a right decent sort, and I don't remember seeing him mix with Herrick and his crew to any extent."

"What was Bowman doing here?" Lance asked.

"Not much of anything," Lockwood replied; "that is, until recently. For the last week or so he'd been acting as a guide to a professor who's been riding the nearby hills."

"Guide, eh?" Lance frowned. "Wonder what was back of that play. Confidentially, Frank Bowman was one of our best operatives."

"The devil you say!" Lockwood's jaw dropped. "It must have been considerable of a shock finding him dead thataway."

"Worse than that," Lance said grimly. "All I ask is to meet the man who did it. Who is this professor you mentioned?"

"Name's Ulysses Z. Jones. Claims to be working out of the Jonesian Institute, of Washington, D. C. Ever hear of him?"

Lance shook his head. "What's his game?"

"Cactus. He rides—"

"Cactus?" Lance interrupted with a puzzled look.

Lockwood shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just telling you what he claims. It sounds crazy to me, but he says he's making a study of the flora—I think that was his word—of the Southwest. He's staying at the hotel. His niece is with him, acting as his secretary. Her name is Gregory—"

"One minute," Lance broke in. "Is this Professor Jones a big man, dark, around thirty, or thirty-five?"

"Nothing like that at all. He's—"

"Never mind. I'll see him eventually." Lance's frown deepened as he drew meditatively on his cigarette. "I can't understand Bowman acting as his guide unless he ties into the situation—"

"Do you mind telling me what, or who, you're looking for?"

"Anybody by the name of Matt Foster in town?"

LOCKWOOD considered, then shook his head. "Not that I know of. The name isn't familiar."

"Probably he'd change his name, anyway. I'll give you more of the story later, sheriff. Meanwhile, what of those hombres who were

with you this afternoon? Who are they and what do they do?"

"Chiricahua Herrick is the leader of that gang. Frankly I don't know what they do. They've been hanging around Pozo Verde for quite a spell now; that is, Herrick, Kilby, Johnson and Ridge have. Those four are right thick. Ordway is a local man. Never amounted to much. Lately he's been tagging after Herrick and the others. If he's considered one of their gang, I don't know it. Fact is, I'd like to know more about that crew myself, but I haven't anything to go on. They don't break any laws that I know of, so I haven't any legal excuse for clamping down on 'em."

Lance smiled. "I understood from your deputy that you ruled with an iron hand here, and that there wasn't any crime."

"You can give Oscar the credit for that."

Lance showed his surprise. "You mean that . . . that—"

"Yeah," Lockwood chuckled, "that sleepy-looking, lemon-drop-devouring, lengthy bag of bones that brought you your supper. But don't you make any mistake about Oscar Perkins. He's the one who keeps this town on the straight and narrow path."

"I'd sure like to know how he does it," Lance said skeptically. "Has he got a rep for a fast draw, or something?"

"That ain't been put to the test yet," Lockwood told him, still grinning. "Ain't been necessary. Oscar just hits 'em!"

"Oscar just what?" Lance's eyes bugged out.

"Hits 'em. When a hombre starts misbehaving, Oscar cracks him over the head with his gun barrel. If the fellow shows signs of coming back for more, Oscar lets him have it with his fist. That always settles it. Talk about a mule's kick!"

Lance grinned. "Maybe the lemon drops have something to do with it. I can't think of anything else to explain it."

"Oscar has fooled a heap of folks. Now, me, I used to slam the hell raisers in my cooler. They didn't mind that so much in the long run, and my jail was always full. Howsomever, this town has discovered it would rather behave than be hit by Oscar. Consequently, Pozo Verde has tamed down a heap. So much so, in fact, that the taxpayers are beginning to say it isn't necessary to maintain two peace officers here."

"Bowman's murder may make them change their minds."

"I wouldn't be surprised. By the way, Tolliver, what do you make of Bowman's hand being painted black?"

Lance shook his head. "It's a mystery to me. Here's something else that's got my brain going in circles." He drew the mescal button from inside his shirt. "This was clutched in Bowman's left hand. I found it before you got there. Know what it is?"

Lockwood took the plant. "Holy smokes—yes!" he said immediately. "This is a peyote. I've heard it called sacred mushroom, piote bean, hikuli—"

"And mescal button," Lance interrupted. "Also dry whiskey."

"I've heard it called a lot of other names by people who tried to keep it away from the Indians," Lockwood frowned, "but it seems to be as hard to stamp out as the marijuana habit."

"The question is," Lance said grimly, "what was Bowman doing with it? What did it have to do with his death—if anything?"

"In the first place," Lockwood said slowly, "I wonder where it came from. I can't say I ever noticed peyotes growing around here. When I was in Texas I used to run across 'em right often. There's a lot of peyote growing down in Mexico, too. You say you found this in Bowman's hand?"

LANCE nodded. "He was hanging on to it like he never meant to let go, too. Sheriff, I've got to get out of here and find out what it's all about."

"You're free to go, any time," Lockwood said. "I did figure it might be a good idea for you to stay overnight, though, until we can cook up an alibi; that is, if you don't mind. After that act I put on to impress Chiricahua Herrick and his gang—"

"I understand. I'm glad you acted as you did. I figure Bowman was killed sometime last night. If so, I'm alibied. About the time he was killed, I was asleep in a little *fonda*, in Tipata, over across the line."

"I know Tipata," Lockwood declared, "and Moreles, who runs the *fonda* over there. I'll let on like I've sent someone to check up on you. If Bowman was taken out there and killed last night—"

"He wasn't killed out there," Lance interrupted. "He was taken out there after he'd been shot."

"You got proof of that?" the sheriff said quickly.

"It's what the evidence showed me," Lance replied. "When his body is brought in, you look careful at the blood—"

"His body was brought to Pozo Verde quite a spell ago. It's over to Doc Drummond's place. Doc's going to hold the inquest tonight."

"As I see it, two riders took Bowman out there after he was shot. I don't know why. They left him there dead, and returned to Pozo Verde. Hours later, Bowman's horse wandered back to town—"

"But you said he was shot before being taken out there. How could he ride his horse—"

The sheriff paused, frowning. Oscar Perkins stood at the doorway of the cell. "Doc Drummond's ready to start the inquest now, Ethan," Oscar announced, sucking on a lemon drop. "You said you wanted to be there."

"I sure do." The sheriff rose from his seat on the bunk.

"I'd like to hear it myself," Oscar said. "At the same time, if Tolliver wants me to stay and keep him company—"

"You go along, Oscar," Lance said. "Both of you keep your ears open. You look at that blood careful, sheriff. Maybe you'll get what I'm driving at."

"I'll do that. And I'll bring you word of the findings just as soon as a decision is reached."

The sheriff and his deputy closed the cell door without locking it, and made their way out of the building. Lance waited a long time for their return, but when they didn't put in an appearance, he extinguished the lamp light and curled up on the bunk to get some sleep.

CHAPTER III

THE CACTUS MAN

EARLY-MORNING sunlight was streaming through Lance's cell window when he awoke. He had slept the night through without interruption. He shoved his sombrero on his head and got to his feet. Oscar Perkins was standing in the cell.

"Inquest kept going dang nigh all

night," the deputy announced. "When a verdict finally was reached, it was so late that the sheriff figured you might as well get your whole sleep in. Just as soon as you wash up, there's some breakfast waiting for you in Ethan's office. He'd like to talk to you."

"I'll be right with you," Lance said. "Much obliged."

"Don't mention it," Oscar said politely and withdrew.

Five minutes later, Lance was sitting down to a tray of breakfast on Lockwood's desk. Lockwood leaned back in his office chair and talked while Lance consumed food. Oscar slouched back on another chair and made inroads on his sack of lemon drops.

"We had quite a session," the sheriff was saying. "Chiricahua Herrick and his crowd were there, along with a lot of other folks. Chiricahua insisted the murderer was already caught, meaning you, and the jury was some impressed. There were a lot of squabbles and arguments, Chiricahua insisting that the jury bring in a verdict against you. I stalled things along by telling them I had sent a man over to Tipata to check on your alibi. 'Bout two this morning I strolled down here to the office, stalled around a spell, and then went back to the inquest with the word that my messenger had returned from Tipata and that your alibi was airtight—"

"And they took your word for that?" Lance asked.

"My word was good with everybody except Chiricahua and his crowd. They wanted to talk to my messenger personal, and they asked a lot of other questions. Howsomever, I represent the law here, and they didn't get no place. Doc Drummond gave his jury a talk. The jury retired for a spell and finally returned a verdict that Bowman had met his death at approximately midnight, night before last, at the hands of some person unknown. Doc had probed out the slug, of course. It was some battered, but looked like a .45. It had entered below the right cheekbone and ranged up at quite a sharp angle. Doc says he thinks Bowman may have lived quite a spell after the bullet struck, though he would have been unconscious, of course."

"Ranged up at a sharp angle," Lance repeated slowly. "Bowman was a fairly tall man. He may have been shot by a shorter one, or he may have been on his horse, and the killer on foot."

"You're positive he wasn't killed where you found the body?" Lockwood asked.

"Positive. Did you examine the blood on Bowman's face?"

"Yes, I did," the sheriff replied, frowning. "There was a streak of dried blood that had run across his nose. Another streak had run up across his forehead and into his hair—"

THERE'S the point," Lance quickly pointed out. "Blood doesn't run up. See what I'm getting at? Bowman was shot, then the murderer threw his body across the saddle of his horse and traveled out there where the body was left in the dry wash—"

"And if Bowman's head hung down over the saddle"—Oscar had straightened in his chair—"the blood running from the wound would course down across his forehead and into the hair. That's the way it looked."

"Oscar, you're smart," Lockwood said.

"Lance is the smart one," Oscar said indolently. "I just recognized

what was pointed out to me."

"And when they took the body out to that dry wash," Lance continued, "they may have put Bowman down on his side. That would account for blood running in the other direction, though there wasn't so much of it, by that time. Maybe he was just left out there on his horse and fell off after a time. That part's not so important. But I think I've proved that Frank Bowman's shooting didn't take place in that dry wash."

"By Jupiter!" Lockwood exclaimed. "You certainly have." He paused; then: "That still doesn't explain what he was doing with that mescal button."

"No, it doesn't," Lance admitted. "But I picked up a couple of other clues, out in that dry wash, before

Lance smashed Kilby off the boardwalk, though he knew Kilby's hardcase friends would take up the fight with guns.

you arrived, sheriff, that I haven't mentioned before. I call them clues, though maybe they don't mean a thing." He ceased talking to produce a small notebook from between the pages of which he extracted a tiny splinter of pine wood and a few threads of dark woolen cloth.

"What are those?" asked the sheriff curiously.

"This bit of pine splinter was sticking to Bowman's sleeve on the arm that held the mescal button. Those twisted wool threads I picked off his right spur. Apparently his spur had caught in a piece of cloth at some time or other."

"What do they tell you?" asked Lockwood.

"Not a great deal," Lance confessed. "They're not objects that would ordinarily be found in a dry wash, of course. Particularly these threads of wool I picked from Bowman's spur. A man couldn't walk far without having those threads work off, so I figure he must have picked 'em up about the time he was shot."

Oscar Perkins put in: "There wasn't any chance that Bowman did a little peyote chewing, was there!" He paused, then added: "Ethan was telling me about finding that mescal button."

"Not a chance," Lance said definitely. "In the first place that button hadn't been dried. In the second place, I knew Frank Bowman. He was in the organization long before I joined, and he had a

right good reputation. No, we'll have to leave that peyote-eating habit to certain of the Indian tribes and their ceremonies. You haven't heard anything of the kind around here, have you?"

Lockwood shook his head. "The Indians hereabouts gave up that sort of thing long ago—if they ever did anything like that." The sheriff paused, then: "There's a small tribe of Yaquente Indians down below the border that might go in for peyote eating, though. Come to think of it, I've heard they do."

Lance nodded. "I've heard of the Yaquentes. Pretty fierce fighters at one time, though they've made peace with the Mexican—"

"A sort of armed peace," Lockwood nodded. "The Mexican government never did entirely subjugate them. Howsomever, those Yaquentes I mentioned haven't kicked up any trouble in years. Small bunches of 'em come to Pozo Verde now and then. They seem civilized enough."

"Maybe they dropped peyotes in favor of lemon drops," Oscar drawled.

"Come to think of it," Lockwood put in, "some Indian tribal ceremonies call for painting parts of the body. Do you suppose there'd be any connection between that and Bowman's hand being painted black and—"

"Jeepers!" Oscar exclaimed. "That's an idea."

Lance shook his head. "I don't think so, sheriff. That wasn't regular paint on Bowman's hand. I examined it right close, smelled it, in fact. It had a sort of creosote odor."

CREOSOTE?" Oscar pricked up his ears. "Wait . . . where did I hear about creosote? Oh, yeah, I remember. There was a section gang working down near the T. N. & A. S. depot, replacing a couple of railroad ties. They painted the new ties with creosote. When the gang left, they forgot a bucket with some creosote in it, standing on the depot platform. Night before last somebody tipped the bucket over. Old Johnny Quinn, the station agent, was madder'n a wet hen. Seems like he stepped into the creosote that had been spilled, and then tracked it into his office. He'd just mopped the office the day before. You know what an old woman Johnny is, Ethan?"

"When did this happen?" Lance said quickly. "The same night Bowman was shot?"

Oscar nodded. "That's right—night before last. Yesterday was one tough day for old Johnny Quinn. On top of being peeved about that spilled creosote, he claimed somebody had broke into his office and stole his bills of lading for what freight came in day before yesterday. He probably lost 'em and had to blame somebody. Remember, Ethan, I mentioned it to you?"

The sheriff said he remembered. "Johnny Quinn is always finding fault with something," he explained to Lance. "S'far as concerns his office being broke into, all's he had to base that on was the fact his window was open when he come to work. Nothing else was missing, except his bills of lading. It's my opinion he forgot to close his window the night before, and his bills blew away."

Lance had finished his breakfast by this time. He rolled and lighted a cigarette, then, rising, donned his sombrero. "I reckon I'll walk over to the railroad station and see where that creosote was spilled," he announced. "Can't tell, I might pick up something."

"Want I should go with you?" Lockwood said.

"Not unless you feel like it. If you're busy—"

The sheriff made a wry face. "I ain't made out my expense report for last month yet, and I've got to get to it. Take Oscar along with you. By the way, that's your gun and belt hanging on that hook across the room. Might be a good idea to put 'em on."

"I'll feel more comfortable, anyway," Lance smiled.

A few moments later, Lance and Oscar were walking east along Main Street. They passed shops and stores of various commercial enterprise, nearly all of which had built-out wooden awnings over the plank sidewalk to protect pedestrians from the broiling sun baking the dusty roadway. Oscar nodded or spoke to several passing townspeople. He and Lance were just going by Lem Parker's General Store when a man in riding breeches and knee-laced boots emerged from the doorway.

"Hi-yuh, professor," Oscar said.

An irritated, vague look disappeared from the man's eyes as they focused on the deputy. "Ah," he smiled suddenly, "it's my lemon-drop friend. How's everything this morning? I've just been trying to get a trowel in the general store. It seems they don't stock such implements."

"Try Herb Rumler's General Store," Oscar suggested. "He carries a line of such tools, rakes, and so on, to accommodate some of the ladies in town who go in for raisin' garden sass and such. By the way, shake hands with my friend, Lance Tolliver—Professor Jones. It was Lance who found Frank Bowman's body."

JUDGING by his thick, gray-streaked, dark hair, Professor Ulysses Z. Jones was probably forty-five or fifty years old. He was of medium height, with a bony frame and an energetic bearing. His healthily tanned face was thin, accenting the contours of rather high cheekbones. He was smoothly shaven. His gray eyes, which were unusually keen, had a manner of suddenly taking on a vague expression, as though the man were chary of revealing innermost thoughts. Almost instantly Lance gained the impression that Professor Jones' mind concealed far more knowledge than was put into words. Despite the heat of the Southwest sun, Jones wore a necktie and loose-fitting tweed jacket. His hat was a soft gray felt with a fairly wide brim. There was something trim, neat, compact about the man, and he displayed a sort of nervous, driving energy in every movement.

Jones was commenting on the Bowman killing. He had a jerky abrupt way of speaking. "—I was most distressed—very sad affair. I liked Bowman, excellent chap. Great shock to you, I presume, Tolliver. Acquainted—by any chance?"

"We had mutual friends," Lance answered evasively. "I felt as though I knew him."

"Sincerely hope the authorities bring the murderer to swift justice."

"I understood," Lance commented, "that Bowman was working for you. Would you have any idea of what he was doing the night he was killed?"

"Not the slightest," Jones replied instantly. "I had hired him to guide me through the hills nearby. He knew this country. Later, we planned going down into a section of Mexico with which he claimed

to be thoroughly familiar. I'll miss him no end."

"Oscar tells me you're on some sort of expedition for the Jonesian Institute—" Lance said.

"Right, right, quite right," Jones spoke jerkily. "Our board of directors decided I was the man to go. You see, we're planning a rare-plant garden—all under glass, of course. You understand, cacti deserves its place—will be one of our largest exhibits, in fact. I'm looking for rare specimens, studying distribution, type locality—that sort of thing. Really a splendid vacation for me."

Oscar bit suddenly down on a lemon drop. His eyes bulged. "Do you mean to say you're going to grow cactus in a garden? What's the good of that? It grows wild all over around here."

Jones laughed shortly. "That's one thing I've discovered people hereabouts don't realize—that they've one of the most striking cacti displays in the Western Hemisphere, right at their doorsteps, you might say. Not appreciated, as it should be, not at all. The value of a garden such as we plan will be great to collectors. They can study, firsthand, specimens many of them will never have an opportunity to see otherwise."

Oscar's jaw dropped. "Collectors?"

"Certainly." Jones sounded a bit irritated. "People collect books, stamps, coins, so why not cacti? All over the world there is a rapidly growing interest in cacti."

Oscar seemed stunned by the thought. He crammed a lemon drop into his mouth. To keep the conversation going, Lance said: "I suppose Europe and Asia have different forms of cactus like in the United States?"

"Not at all, not at all. There is no cacti at all in the Eastern Hemisphere—that is, native cacti. Africa, of course, has its own form of succulents, but the Western Hemisphere is the only place true cacti is to be found."

"These collectors"—Oscar had somewhat recovered from his surprise—"where do they get their cactus?"

"Cactus nurseries and companies, of course. It's a growing business. Out in California, one company has been in business since the early seventies just supplying the Eastern trade."

Oscar burst into laughter. "Haw-haw! First time I ever heard of a cactus needin' a nursery."

Jones turned half impatiently away. Struck by a sudden impulse, Lance withdrew the mescal button from his shirt. "You seem right well posted on cactus, professor. Maybe you can tell me what sort of plant this is?"

JONES stiffened suddenly at sight of the plant. A warm glow entered his eyes. "Why, bless me! A *Lophophora williamsii!* Wherever did you find this! I've seen none on the hills hereabouts. Its distribution generally is from central Mexico to southern Texas. Where did—"

"What did you call it?" Oscar looked narrowly at Jones. "Loafer-for-William? Is that what you said?"

Lance smiled. "We generally call it a peyote, or mescal button."

"True, true," Jones jerked out. He had the plant in his hand now, examining it. "I've heard those names. It's one of many forms known as dumpling cacti. I say, have you ever—"

"Dumpling cactus?" from Oscar. "There's no spines on that—"

"Several species of cacti have

practically no spines." Jones turned impatiently back to Lance. "I've heard that Indians of certain tribes eat these. Produce some sort of narcotic effect—delusions of grandeur—fantastic, colorful visions—trances—all that sort of thing. Is it true do you know?"

"I've never tried eating 'em myself," Lance told him with a smile, "but I know it's done. Those peyotes are first cut in sections and dried, of course, before being eaten. The whole practice has been pretty well stamped out, nowadays. It's forbidden, you know."

"It is possible, then." Jones was intensely interested. "I understood that a Dr. . . . Dr.—the name escapes me at present—had isolated certain alkaloids in an analysis of this genus. You say you didn't find it in this region?"

"I found it," Lance said cautiously, "but not growing. I don't know just where it came from."

"I'd like to have this specimen," the professor said eagerly; "interested in studying it. If you don't mind—"

"Sure, take it along." Lance scarcely knew what else to say at the moment. He decided right then, however, to see more of the professor.

Jones was shaking hands again. "Delighted if you'd come to my hotel and meet my niece," he said cordially. "Like to have you tell me more of the Indians who make a practice of becoming intoxicated on peyote." He departed, walking swiftly along Main Street.

Oscar heaved a long sigh. "There goes your Loafer-for-William," he chuckled. "Me, I can't figure whether the professor is a nut, or just plain cuckoo. Imagine trying to make us believe folks grow cactus gardens."

"Don't jump to any hasty conclusions, Oscar," Lance advised thoughtfully. "He may be a nut, but I figure there's more to Jones than shows on the surface."

They had progressed along Main Street, and were just turning the corner at Laredo Street, when an angry shout reached them from across the roadway. George Kilby had emerged from the doorway of a building which bore the sign of the Pozo Verde Saloon.

"I may get balled up on cactus," Oscar said with some satisfaction, "but here comes something I do understand. Kilby looks like he's heading for trouble, and we're right in his path!"

CHAPTER IV

LANCE HITS HARD

IT was evident to Lance and Oscar that Kilby had been imbibing rather heavily at the bar of the Pozo Verde Saloon. The man approached them from across the street, walking with a decided lurch. His eyes were bloodshot and angry, and liquor, or some liquid, had been spilled down the left leg of the brand-new overalls he was wearing.

He was halfway across the roadway when another torrent of angry words spilled from his lips, ending with, "Travelin' with murderers, now, eh, Deputy Perkins."

"I'm sure going to have to bend a gun barrel across that hombre's Stetson," Oscar muttered to Lance. "I wonder how much he can stand."

"Wait, let me handle this," Lance said quickly. "It's me his words are aimed at."

Oscar shrugged. "Go to it, but watch yourself."

Kilby's step was a trifle uncertain as he confronted Lance. "Pretty lucky, you are, Mr. Lancelot Tolliver. Only for the law being on

your side, we'd have the sidewinder who bumped off my good old pal, Bowman."

"Look, Kilby, you've had a couple of drinks too many," Lance said quietly. "Why don't you go away and sleep it off?"

"Tryin' to get rid of me, eh?" Kilby sneered. "Well, it won't work. We're going to put the bee on you yet. We'll bust that alibi of yours wide open. You know what? Chiricahua, hisself, has gone ridin' down to Tipata. He's goin' to find out if you stayed there that night or not. We was both going, only—"

"Only," Oscar drawled, "it looks to me like you was too drunk to ride at leaving time. Well, Cherrycow Herrick will find out that Lance's alibi holds water—which same you'd be better off if that's all you held."

Kilby teetered gravely back and forth a moment, owlishly eying the deputy. He lifted one admonishing finger. "Now I ain't got no . . . hic! . . . quarrel with you, Oscar. It's this Tolliver hombre I'm aimin' to—"

"Forget it, Kilby," Lance laughed good-naturedly. "Go get yourself some sleep." He talked to the man cajolingly as one would to a child. "Look, you've spilt some whiskey on your nice new overalls. You'd better go wash them—"

"What do you know about my overalls?" Kilby's eyes had narrowed. For some reason Lance's words appeared to have a somewhat sobering effect on the man. He straightened up and came a step nearer, curses tumbling from his thick lips.

"Cut it out, Kilby!" Lance said sternly.

Kilby rushed on, heedless of the warning. He called Lance a name no fighting man will take. Lance didn't want to hit him, but there seemed nothing else to do. His fist shot out—not too hard—and Kilby went stumbling awkwardly off the sidewalk to sprawl on his back in the dust.

That completely sobered the man without knocking any sense into his head. He came struggling up from the roadway, one hand clawing at his gun butt.

LANCE took two quick steps forward. His left fist sank to the wrist in Kilby's middle, his right crashed against the side of the man's jaw. An explosive grunt was expelled from Kilby's lips, and he began to sag. For a moment he stood bent over, arms dangling limply at his sides. Then slowly he sank to his knees and rolled on his back. His eyes were closed, and he was dead to the world.

"The old one-two," Oscar said approvingly, calmly stuffing a lemon drop in his mouth. "Very nice. I don't think I could've done better myself."

A crowd had commenced to gather. Lance said: "C'mon, let's get out of here." Oscar told a couple of men in the crowd to get Kilby's unconscious form off the street, then followed Lance down Laredo Street in the direction of the railroad station.

"Hang it!" Lance growled, when Oscar had caught up. "There wasn't any other way out of it, but I do hate to hit a hombre that's been drinking heavy."

"Mebbe so," Oscar said judiciously, "but they go out quicker in that condition. Now if you'd just get a mite more snap into your wrist as you hit—"

"Let's forget it," Lance cut in.

"You're upset." Oscar thrust a paper sack toward Lance. "Here,

have a lemon drop. It'll soothe your nerves."

Without realizing what he was doing, Lance mechanically thrust a lemon drop into his mouth.

"Ah, another convert," Oscar chuckled. "You'll be an addict in no time."

Lance started to laugh. Then he sobered as he said: "Like I say, I hate to hit a drunk, but I was thinking about something else. It seemed to make Kilby madder'n ever when I mentioned his new overalls. Danged if I understand why. I was speaking as friendly as possible."

"Drunks are sensitive on queer points sometimes," Oscar drawled. "I've known 'em to fight at the drop of the hat at the mention of a new one."

"New what?" Lance asked absentmindedly.

"Hat. Don't you know what we're talking about?"

"I was thinking about overalls."

"I certainly pick intelligent company, this mornin'," Oscar commented. "One talks about spiny plant life and the other about everyday clothing. Forget it—here's the depot."

They had reached the railroad tracks which paralleled Main Street a block back. Beyond the tracks were scattered a line of Mexican adobe houses, strung along a rather crooked roadway. Between the tracks and the single line of buildings fronting Main were heaps of old rubbish, tin cans and littered papers.

Oscar led the way toward the railroad station, a small frame building, painted red, with the T. N. & A. S. sign erected on its roof. The station stood about five feet above the earth on a platform constructed of heavy planks.

OSCAR led the way up the short flight of steps to the platform. From inside the station came the clattering taps of a telegraphic instrument. Abruptly the sound ceased and a small fuzzy little old man appeared in the doorway.

"No, Oscar Perkins, I don't want no lemon drops," he stated in a cantankerous voice, before Oscar had had an opportunity to say a word. He wore faded overalls with bib attached, and on his scanty gray hair was a stiff-peaked cap bearing the letters: T. N. & A. S. R. R. Spectacles rested on his sharp nose.

"Ain't asked you to have one," Oscar said calmly. "Johnny Quinn, shake hands with my friend, Lance Tolliver. You know"—to Lance—"Johnny just about runs the T. N. & A. S. He's the combination station agent, freight agent, telegraph operator, swamper, train dispatcher and—"

"There's more truth'n poetry in them remarks," Johnny Quinn squeaked. He gave Lance a limp hand, then turned back to Oscar: "What ye want?"

"Don't want nothing," Oscar said lazily. "Lance is new to town, and I was just showing him the sights. We didn't want to overlook your depot."

"I can 'preciate thet," Johnny Quinn nodded. He seemed more friendly now. "Ye'd be surprised now to l'arn just how much freight was put off at this little depot. By the way, Oscar, ye didn't catch them thieves whut took my bills, did ye?"

"Sheriff Lockwood is running down a hot clue on that, right now," Oscar said, without batting an eye.

"Oscar was saying you found your window open yesterday morning and certain of your papers missing," remarked Lance.

Quinn nodded emphatically.

"Valyble papers they was, Mr. Tolliver. I been maintainin' right along we should have a night man on duty in the depot, but them brass hats back East won't pay me no 'tention. Some day I'll up and quit 'em, then they'll see whut's whut! And we should have better law enforcement in this town, too, whut with hoodlums spillin' cre'sote all over my platform. Right after I'd mopped the office, too, and it got tracked inside."

"Where was the creosote spilled?" Lance asked.

Old Quinn led the way to a place near the edge of the platform, where a dark brownish-black stain had seeped into the heavy planks. "Lucky they wa'n't much cre'sote in thet bucket. It'd made a fine mess! I'm a-keepin' thet bucket and next time when them section hands come back and ask for it, I aim to give 'em Hail Columbia! Bein' wasteful with company property is bad enough, but— And another thing"— Johnny Quinn was warming to his subject now—"if them hoodlums whut tipped over the cre'sote come back a-whinin' for their cold chisel, I ain't a-goin' to give it to 'em—"

"Was a cold chisel left here?" Lance asked.

Old Johnny nodded indignantly. "It's my opinion," he said confidentially, "thet they figgered to pry open some of the boxes of freight and steal somethin'. Yes siree! But I reckon nothing was left for 'em. Folks usually come here and collect whut freight's due, and I ain't had no complaints ner an inquiry 'bout anythin' that didn't come when it should."

"You mean," Lance asked, "that folks just come and collect their freight when it arrives without signing for it?"

"Sartain, I know everybody here. I bring 'em the bills at the end of the month and they sign 'em then. Only this time, I'll be minus them bills thet was stole."

"Can't you check up and get duplicate bills?" Lance asked.

Quinn nodded. "It'll take a mite of time, though. I figure to get at that right soon."

"I take it," Lance said, "that the same folks get freight shipped in right along."

"Same folks," Johnny said. "Cases of liquor fer the saloons, canned goods fer the general stores, small boxes fer the barber shops, and so on. Folks jest come down and pick up their stuff when it's put offn the train. Anything unusual is put off, I notice it, ye betcha!" He paused, then his mouth sagged a trifle. "Come to think on it," he said slowly, "there was one box I never noticed before. From a company strange to me. Now I wonder who got thet?" He removed his cap and scratched his scanty hair in perplexity. "Shucks! Reckon it don't make no difference. Whoever it b'longed to picked 'er up, or I'd had a complaint. Thet's the trouble, with my bills missin'— Whut'd ye find there, Mr. Tolliver?"

LANCE had suddenly stooped and retrieved from between planks, clogged with dirt, a small pine splinter. There were two or three other splinters nearby. Lance said: "Only this," and held up the splinter to the old man's view, after which he calmly commenced picking his teeth with it.

"Oh," Johnny grunted, "I thought ye'd found somethin' valyble."

Lance laughed. "It might be to some people. You were talking about a box of freight that looked strange to you, Mr. Quinn. What kind of a box was it?"

"Jest an ordinary pine box," Quinn sniffed, "light freight is usual' shipped in. Whut did ye expect?"

"I mean," Lance said easily, "how big was it?"

"Oh, I dunno." Quinn was vague in his ideas. "'Bout so big, I reckon." With his skinny arms he measured the size of the missing box in the air.

"Pretty heavy?" Lance asked next.

"Not turrible," Quinn said, frowning. "I just remember puttin' it on my truck with some other boxes and wheelin' 'em over to stack agin' the depot wall."

"You don't remember who it was for?"

"Consarn it!" Quinn said angrily. "Ain't I told ye I don't know? Now ye've got me thinkin' on thet, ye've spoiled my hull day." His frown deepened. "I jest remember seein' the label pasted on the box, tellin' who it was from and where it was a-goin'. Folks was all around me, already pickin' up their shipments. Thet address was writ in pen an' ink. I didn't have no time to stop and decipher writin'—"

"Was the whole address label in writing?" Lance asked.

"No, I rec'lect that was in print, like most labels."

"Think hard," Lance urged. "Where was it from!"

"Doggone!" Old Johnny Quinn squealed angrily. "Ain't I a-thinkin'? I'm concentratin' like all get out and—" He paused suddenly; then: "Wait, wait—thet box had been shipped from— Cracky! I can see thet label plain's day, only I don't remember. It was shipped from—from some sort of Southwest Something Company. I wish I could think of that middle word. All's I can think of is cactus. Wouldn't that be the consarnedest idea? Southwest Cactus Co. Hee-hee! Like if there was a company org'nized to sell something that grows wild all over—"

"Cactus?" Lance said quickly.

Quinn paused from lack of breath. "I do get the most redickerlous idees, sometimes," he gasped. "No, it sartainly couldn't have been cactus."

"Do you remember where it came from?" Lance queried.

Quinn concentrated. "Texas," he said at last; "El Paso, Texas. Nope, I'm wrong! It was some place in New Mexico. Or was it Texas? Come to think on it, seems like I rec'lect readin' Colorady on thet box." He removed the cap and scratched his head some more. The harder he concentrated, the angrier he became. Suddenly he exploded heatedly: "I don't know why it should make any business of yours where my freight comes from. You come around here askin' questions like a brass hat and a-wastin' of my time. Valyble railroad company time! If ye're figgerin' to ship anythin', or if ye expect freight to arrive, I'll be pleased to take care of ye. Otherwise, I'm too busy for any more lallygaggin'!"

He spun angrily about, entered his office.

LANCE looked at Oscar. Oscar looked at Lance. "I reckon we might as well leave," the deputy sighed. "I know that old coot, and he won't talk to us no more today. But, Lance, do you reckon a box did come from the Southwest Cactus Co.—if there is such a company? And how does it all fit in? What's the creosote got to do with it? That's the first I've heard of a cold chisel, too. And that pine splinter you picked up—"

"Whoa!" Lance laughed. "Maybe

we got more out of that conversation than you figure." They slowly descended the steps to the cinder-packed earth around the platform. Lance surveyed the ground for "sign," but it was too tracked up to furnish any fresh information. Oscar remained silent while they walked slowly back toward the center of town.

Finally Lance spoke: "I'm going to do a little supposing and speculating, and see if I can reconstruct a picture of what happened to Frank Bowman. I may be miles off in my guess, but here's the way I see it. As you know, Bowman was here as one of our operatives—I'll explain why at another time. Anyway, we'll say he hit on some sort of clue here. I don't know just what, but it was hot. I've a hunch it was connected with peyotes—"

"Basing that on the fact he had one in his hand when you found him?"

"Exactly. We'll say Bowman was watching a certain man. Now, mescal buttons don't grow hereabouts, so this certain man had a supply of the plants shipped here from some cactus company. Let's suppose Bowman saw that box of cactus plants and got suspicious, though he wouldn't know for sure there were peyotes inside. He watched and no one called for it. Maybe the guilty man knew Bowman was watching the box. When no one called for the box, Bowman decided to open it and learn what it contained. With a cold chisel he pried off the top of the box—"

"There's the cold chisel Johnny Quinn found!" Oscar interjected.

Lance nodded. "We'll say the box top splintered when it was forced off. I saw splinters on the station platform, remember, and picked one up. With the box open, Bowman stuck his hand inside and got a peyote. A loose splinter at the edge of the box stuck in Bowman's shirt sleeve."

Lance continued: "Now Bowman has his peyote evidence. He knows who the box is shipped to. But that person, or some of his gang, are watching Bowman. They see him break into the box. Remember this is around midnight; it's dark. Bowman doesn't see his assailant approach. Just as Bowman straightens up from the box, someone comes running toward the platform. It's too late for Bowman to pull his gun. The killer's bullet strikes at a sharp angle—proving he was on the earth, below the platform. He may even have been hiding under the platform. Bowman falls, and as he goes down his right hand strikes that bucket of creosote standing near, tipping it over. The creosote floods out over Bowman's hand, accidentally painting it black."

"Lance, you're sure knocking the mystery out of this."

WHEN a man hasn't the facts," Lance said grimly, "he has to work his imagination overtime . . . Let's get on. Somebody takes away the box of peyotes. Somebody gets through Johnny Quinn's office window and steals the bill of lading, so the shipment of cactus can't be traced to the guilty man—right off at least. Now, remember, it was Dr. Drummond's opinion that Bowman, while unconscious, didn't die at once. Something had to be done with the body. The killer didn't dare risk firing more shots for fear of attracting attention. And he didn't dare leave the body there for fear it might be found, and Bowman, regaining consciousness, make some sort of dying statement—"

"So they took the body out to that wash where you found it."

"That's my idea," Lance nodded. "They threw the body across the saddle of Bowman's horse and lit out pronto. I figure it took two to lift him to the saddle, one at the shoulders, one at the feet. Maybe Bowman's spur rowel caught on one man's shirt. That accounts for the woolly threads I found on Bowman's spur. Remember, this is largely guesswork."

"Darn good guesswork," Oscar said admiringly.

"Meanwhile," Lance continued, "in the darkness, the killers had failed to notice that Bowman clutched that mescal button in his hand. Bowman was a man of great determination, strong will. Probably his last conscious thought was to hang on to that bit of evidence at any cost. So he was still gripping that button when they dumped him off his horse, out on that dry wash. As he died and grew cold, his fingers stiffened rigidly about the plant, and didn't release it until I took it from his hand."

"Jumping Jehoshaphat, Lance! You've hit it!"

"It looks that way to me, though I might be striking wide of the mark."

"Lance!" Oscar exclaimed excitedly. "Peyote is a cactus—"

"That's what I've been thinking," Lance said grimly. "There's just one man who'd be having cactus shipped to Pozo Verde—"

"Professor Ulysses Z. Jones," Oscar said angrily. "Professor, huh? The murdering so-and-so. By jigger, Lance, I'm going to arrest that buzzard—"

"Wait a minute"—from Lance. "You arrest him and what happens? He pulls into his shell, hires a lawyer, and gets us all tangled in legal red tape. We won't get any place. Nope, you'd better let me handle this, Oscar."

"It's Jones, all right," Oscar muttered angrily. "Remember how anxious he was to get that mescal button you had. He wanted to dispose of that evidence. But if you won't let me arrest him, what do you—"

"I'm going after him myself," Lance announced, hard-voiced. "This is no time for fooling with the rules of law. There's only one thing will make Jones talk—and that's the muzzle end of a Colt gun!"

"You don't figure to tackle him alone?" Oscar said dubiously.

"Why not? If I'm not a match for that mild-mannered—"

"Mild-mannered, my eye! That's just a pose. You won't be bucking just Jones—you'll be bucking his whole gang. I'm certain now that he isn't working this alone. You say yourself that Bowman was a right good man. Yet look what happened to him."

Lance was silent for a few moments, then his jaw set determinedly. He drew out his six-shooter and spun the cylinder to see that all was in good mechanical working order. Then he shoved the gun back into the holster.

"Odds or no odds, I've got to take the chance," he insisted stubbornly. "From now on, it's either Jones or me. This town isn't big enough for both of us. I don't like murderers! Come on, Oscar, there's a showdown due!"

Did Professor Jones really murder Frank Bowman? What part do Chiricahua Herrick and his hardcase friends play in the mystery? What is the meaning of the mescal button found in the dead man's hand? Follow this blood-chilling range mystery in next week's Western Story.

No fence could hold the Red Mirage—he would escape or kill himself trying!

BRAND OF A MUSTANGER

BY CHERRY WILSON

"It's like them knights of old," Sierra, veteran wrangler of the Flying Star, explained it to the other cowboys. "It's like them ol' knights which, when they felt a fatal fancy fer a gal, had to do some mighty task to win her favor. Carol Belle has set Nate to catch that stallion afore he kin ask her hand!"

For thus only could Sierra—or anyone else—explain how a steady-going young puncher like Nate Pender had been lured after the Red Mirage, as the few privileged to glimpse him called that wild mustang king. A horse whose awesome perfections seemed to fill all space, blot out all else, so that it seemed no earthbound thing, but a man's dream of a horse that had materialized against the colored peaks and turrets of the Rainbow Rims!

Sierra's explanation seemed a logical one. For though no ear had caught a whisper of that promise given on the brink of Rampart Canyon, the cowboys naturally sensed a connection between the girl with whom Nate had spent so much time this summer and his homeric endeavor. And they were as near the truth as outsiders usually are. Carol Belle had not set that task for Nate. He had set it for himself that day

they climbed to the Rainbow Rims on their last ride together!

All summer, Bill Brandley's pretty little niece had been visiting at the Flying Star. She was going home tomorrow. And though the sun still blazed with August force and wild asters blued the chaparral, a wintry chill struck deep into Nate Pender's heart. For him, summer was done. There would be no spring. For Carol would never come back. And parting was a stifling pain that grayed his dark, lean face and clamped his tongue on words he did not dare put to the test.

For, Nate told himself, riding silently beside the girl, to Carol he was just the Flying Star puncher who had taken her places. She liked him —yes. If she had stayed in the Rainbow Rims, some day perhaps— But there hadn't been time enough! *If only God would grant him another July and August!*

Even as this wild plea was rising in Nate's breast, their horses suddenly clambered out on a high ledge overlooking Rampart Canyon, and they saw the Red Mirage!

The stallion stood on the canyon's opposite rim, against a sky on fire with the setting sun. He, too, seemed on fire. Like smoke in a breeze, his long, black mane and tail swirled about him, and out of this smoke his bright sorrel coat flickered like vibrant flame. Proud head high, legs braced for flight, he poised there to throw a swift look at them, while the hoofs of his fleeing mustang band beat like pelting hail across the chasm. Then, flinging back his head with a piercing whistle, he, too, was gone.

The girl drew a deep and rapturous breath. "Nate," she cried in a thrill-shaken voice, "Nate, I want him! I want that horse!"

His own blood tingling at the red splendor of the wild stallion, Nate told her: "Reckon everyone feels the same way, Carol. Everyone who's seen Red Mirage. An' most of them wear themselves out tryin' to get him. Then they quit wantin' —like you don't *want* the moon, or stars—or the mirage they say he is."

"But he's not!" Carol was all but crying in her excitement. "He's *real* —and he can be caught!"

"Mebbe." Nate smiled soberly. "But in the two years since first he was seen on these rims a dozen men have tried to catch him, an' he still runs free. Ropes won't touch him. Snares—traps—he's too smart for them. An' when hunters try to run him, he just fades like he wasn't there at all."

"If I were a man, I'd find some way to catch him—make him mine!" cried the girl, her gaze still on that rim where the Red Mirage had faded a moment before.

Nate would remember that! He would remember Carol as she said it, her slight figure tilted forward in the saddle, her white sombrero hanging from its chin thong against one shoulder, revealing her glory of golden hair, her eyes blue stars of wonder.

"But you're leavin' tomorrow," he said in an unsteady tone. "Goin' home to Denver. How could you keep a fightin' wild stallion in the big town?"

Slowly Carol's eyes came back to him, then fell to the bridle reins she toyed with in trembling hands. "But I could come back," she said in a soft whisper. "I could come back—if there was anything to come for."

And she added, flushed with more than the sunset's fire: "If that horse was waiting for me in the Flying Star corral, I . . . I couldn't wait to get here."

So, seeing in the Red Mirage a

promise of another July and August, Nate set for himself that mighty task! Set it irrevocably in his quiet vow to her:

"He'll be waitin' for you, Carol Belle."

CAROL BELLE was gone. And every bunkhouse, every camp in the Rainbow Rims, buzzed with news that Nate Pender had asked his boss for an indeterminate lay-off in which to catch the Red Mirage. A lay-off Bill Brandley granted against his better judgment and under protest.

"Crazy business!" That had been the blunt-tongued, forthright old cowman's word for it.

And this morning—out before the bunkhouse with Sierra and the rest of the crew, watching Nate rope his pack of bedding and provisions on a second horse—old Bill was of the same opinion.

"Crazy business!" he blustered in a last-minute attempt to talk sense into his favorite rider. "Runnin' a fuzztail in them rims is plumb suicidal! Men just as good as you, Nate, has been lured after that Mirage an' come to grief!"

And grimly he particularized: "Take Chuck Evans. Chuck took up that chase with three as good saddle hosses as ever looked through a bridle. An' left two up there. One neck-broke from a fall off a cliff; the other rode to death. An' himself alive by a miracle! An' there was Bronc Craig—crack mustanger of this whole State. He lost hisself in that tangle of canyons an' nigh starved to death afore he got out. If you got the sense I allus give you credit for, you'll shy off that red devil!"

"That's what *you* think, Bill," drawled a lanky waddy from the bunkhouse steps. "But if you'd listen to Sierra, here, you'd know Nate ain't shyin' off odds or dangers. He's elected hisself one of these here knights of the garters—"

"Or one of them round tables," inserted another grinning puncher from his perch on the hitching rail. "Nate's catchin' that hoss fer his lady fair. Which is what comes, boss, of your having a knockout stepniece around all summer."

Girls, reflected old Bill, sure could raise hob on a cow ranch! But, glancing at Nate, working with swift efficiency over his pack, deaf to the banter for all the heed he gave to it, the rancher was struck by the look on the young rider's face. A white, desolate look, that carried Bill back to his own youth. And he said with gruff gentleness:

"Foolin' aside, Nate, it's crazy business. That hoss kin play tag with you in them rims till you both drop of old age."

Nate threw the last loop of a diamond hitch about his pack and pulled it tight. "I ain't figurin' to play tag with him."

"Waal, even if you haze him out, there ain't a hoss in the State kin run him down."

Nate swung to the saddle of his buckskin, lead rope in hand. "I ain't figurin' to run him down."

"Jist what are you figurin', Nate?" demanded old Bill aggrievedly.

The boy flicked the reins on the buckskin's neck. "I'm figurin' to bring him back," he said, his lean jaw set.

And he rode away from them, across the sun-seared range, and up to that vast, chaotic upheaval of peak, pinnacle, and cathedral rock—time-sculptured, mineral-stained every dazzling shade of orange, red, blue and violet—that was the Rainbow Rims.

WEEKS passed. Summer died in truth as Nate went tirelessly about the task to which he'd set himself.

Camped beside a tiny spring, seeping from under one of those mineral-stained rims, he shivered through bitter autumn nights, to rise at dawn, cinch a saddle on the buckskin, humped and rebellious from the cold, and ride the high ridges of the stallion's range.

Rarely did he catch even a fleeting glimpse of the Red Mirage. Yet by those glimpses he followed the movements of the band, studying their habits, learning at what springs they watered, where their grazing places were. Always he tried desperately to find some way to catch the horse, so Carol Belle would have something to come back for!

When night hung over the rims and each pinnacle wore its crown of stars, Nate sat by his lonely campfire, thinking of the men who'd attempted this same task and come to grief! Men as good as he was—*better*.

Only a mile below this spring lay the bleached skeleton of the horse Chuck Evans had lost in that thousand-foot fall. He'd heard Chuck tell a dozen times how he'd caught at a sapling going over and pulled himself from the saddle when his horse was in midair! And Bronc Craig, who made his living trapping mustangs, had been lured back in this maze of canyons, and it was another miracle that *his* skeleton wasn't bleaching there! And other Rainbow riders had had experiences almost as bad!

Crazy business? Yes, but every man was crazy at some time in his life about a woman. The one woman he knows is meant for him! Because he was crazy that way about Carol Belle, he had to catch the Red Mirage!

But—Nate faced this question squarely after days of tedious spying on the band—how catch a horse you couldn't snare, or trap, or run? You couldn't! You had to do one of those things. Do it better than any man had ever done it before!

The best bet was a corral. He knew just the spot for one—that draw below the spring on Tom-Tom Mountain, where the mustangs watered when they were on this side of the rims. A narrow, twisting draw, walled by cliffs and choked with brush. He'd fence in the gaps between those broken cliffs on either side, leaving the ends open so the band could use the trail to the spring until all was ready. He'd join the two strings of fence at the upper end of the draw, and then when they came to water he'd close in on them from behind and the job would be done.

Fired by this plan, Nate set to work rolling great boulders between gaps in the natural barriers of the cliffs, dragging cottonwood poles by his saddlehorn from the grove far down the mountain. Painstakingly he covered the ends with mud or concealed them with leaves and moss, so there were no raw surfaces to attract even the overwary suspicion of a wild horse.

Then, early one golden October morning, Nate joined the fence at the upper end, cutting off the trail. When next the mustangs entered the draw he'd race down to the lower end and bar their escape back with poles already cut and hidden there. With the Red Mirage penned in this limited area, it would be a simple matter to rope and take him back to the Flying Star.

Stretched flat on a point of rock overhanging this open end—as he

had lain most of yesterday and all this interminable forenoon, his buckskin hidden in the rocks behind—Nate at last saw the wild band approaching! Slowly they came, single file around the mountain, stopping to pluck tufts of grass along the trail, totally unsuspicious of any danger. Some twenty head in all, mares, colts, yearlings, as variously colored as these wild rims they ranged.

But Nate had eyes only for that one horse whose awesome perfections blotted out all else! Whose ruddy skin rippled like flame in the black smoke of his breeze-tossed mane as he moved in the wake of the band with the proud grace, the unfettered swing of the wild born!

The strain became unbearable to Nate, and he tore his eyes from the stallion to the paint mare with leggy foal unsuspectingly leading the band between the hidden portals of that trap! And on—ten yards—twenty, until every mustang was in! She was still steadily advancing when—

Something happened! Something Nate could never understand. Surely it must have been some instinctive warning beyond man's ken that suddenly jerked the wild king up with a shrill blast that brought every horse to a standstill. Held them quivering; then, at a shriller blast, sent them whirling in mad flight back the way they'd come!

Frantic at the failure of his plan, knowing the mustangs would never come near this place again, Nate threw himself on his horse and plunged down the bluff in a crazy attempt to head them off, turn them back in. But he reached that opening to find only a thin dust veil shimmering over the torn-up trail down which the mustangs had taken flight! All his labor gone for naught! Precious weeks worse than wasted!

BUT Nate didn't give up. If anything, he was more determined to take the wild horse back. And despite this failure, he still believed his best bet was some kind of blind corral, as far from here as possible.

He had noticed that each time he startled the horses on the west side of the rims, their route of escape was down through Rampart Canyon, where they lost themselves in the innumerable folds and washes that circled back to their high range. And in the depths of this canyon he started work on another corral.

More days of heart-breaking labor, more aching muscles, torn and bleeding hands, until at last it was done. A stanch, impregnable inclosure, too high, Nate was sure, for any mustang to jump over. Strong enough to hold the wildest. With wings extending to either canyon wall and stout bars ready to throw in place once the band was in. And the night he completed this work the first snow fell.

In that fresh snow carpet next dawn he easily picked up track of the band, ranging, by some good fortune, on this side of the rims. All that forenoon he followed them, careful to hold the buckskin back where he would not be heard or seen. Until well past midday, when the band circled around to the brink of Rampart—where he wanted them!

Crouched low on the buckskin, Nate suddenly swung into view, thundering down on the band. He saw them break and fly through those snowy corridors, the paint mare lining out at the head of the band, the Red Mirage, a streak of fire against this white background, driving them on! Saw them, true to the route they always took, pour over the rim into Rampart Canyon.

"We got 'em!" he yelled to his horse. "They can't get out over

these walls. An' our pen will catch 'em like bats in a sack!"

And the buckskin, anxious himself to end this chase and get back with the ranch remuda again, lay hard on the heels of the flying band that torturous, curving, three-mile stretch of canyon. Was hard on their heels when the terrified scream of the lead mare rang back, telling Nate she had seen the trap! Galloping around the bend, he saw her slide to a stop with a snort of terror, whirl and make for the east wall, seeking some escape over it. Finding none, she raced madly back down the canyon. Nate dashed after, shrieking like a madman, striving so to terrorize the band that they wouldn't turn and charge past him. And succeeding!

With no choice left to them, the mustangs ran straight into the wings of that corral, into the inclosure itself! And the cowboy, only a moment behind, threw his horse across the entrance, barring egress. Frenziedly, the mustangs lunged at the fence. All but the Red Mirage, pivoting in that uproarious mass to face Nate with blazing eyes and open jaws, ready for the charge. There was no time to get down and put up the bars, so Nate caught up his rope, confident of his ability to get it on the stallion in the rush past him.

A rush that didn't come! For the wild king, too, seemed confident of the far-reaching power of man! Whirling, he fought through the screaming, lunging tangle of horses to the back of the corral that Nate had built too high for any mustang to jump over and strong enough to hold the wildest wild horse! But the impact of the stallion's body, as he launched himself against that top rail, shook snow from every timber, made the whole structure shudder, throwing the horse back among his seething followers!

Regaining his balance, the Red Mirage hurled himself at the barrier again. Nate heard the top rail crack. Saw the horse drop back, slip on the slushy footing and fall. Then the wild-eyed band, swarming over him, hid him from sight. But only for an instant. Out of that tangle the red body heaved once more, and once more launched itself through the air.

Appalled at the spirit of the horse, in terror lest he batter himself to death or make kindling of his corral, Nate spurred through the crazed mustangs, rope swinging, hoping to get a throw at the stallion. But too late. He heard that body land. The top rail splintered, broke! The stallion's weight fell on the rail beneath, knocking it loose!

Teetering, then, on what was left of that fence, the horse balanced forward and fell—to freedom! A full half of the band followed through the opening he'd made for them, while the rest surged back toward the unbarred exit to make their escape up the canyon, unheeded by Nate.

For Nate was watching the Red Mirage fade from sight around the bend below him! The glistening snow that blinded his vision, mocking him with its promise of more to come! Of drifts that would treacherously bury the washes, distort the bluffs, so it would be as much as a man's life was worth to ride over them!

In his despair, then, Nate lost his head utterly and started out to do all the things he'd told Bill he wouldn't do. He played tag with the stallion, running him from one end of the rims to the other! He expended his horses and himself in senseless attempts to corner the Red

Mirage in some pocket or against a bluff, get him at rope's end.

One gray, snowy afternoon, after four days of this mad chase, Nate flushed the band off the highest peak of old Tom-Tom. Pounding after them, straight down a treacherous, snow-slick slope, the buckskin lost his footing, fell, pitching end for end, rolling to the bottom. Nate, unable to free himself from the saddle, rolled with him! And when, at last, the buckskin struggled painfully up, and Nate fell free, he lay as he had fallen.

And lying there, unmoving, the stallion's triumphant whistle drifting back to him, Nate Pender knew that neither Chuck Evans, Bronc Craig, nor any of the Rainbow riders who had followed the lure of the Red Mirage, had come to such grief as this—out in these abandoned rims, winter's chill in his veins, its snow sifting over him—crushed, broken, beyond power to lift foot to stirrup—past all hope of help!

SIERRA was the early bird at the Flying Star. His job was to round up the horses and have them in the corral by the time the cowboys finished breakfast. To do this, he had to be up before sunrise.

Astir this nebulous dawn, the old wrangler was hobbling toward the corral to get the flea-bitten mare kept up for this morning chore, when he suddenly stopped stockstill in the trail, staring numbly at another horse, drooping before the gate. Nate Pender's buckskin! One of the two Nate had taken on his knight's errant! A keen sense of disappointment stabbed Sierra's heart. In the days of old, knights had been bold. But nowadays all it took was a little snow to drive the boldest of them back! Nate had given up his quest and come home.

That was Sierra's first thought. But almost immediately he realized Nate wouldn't leave a horse standing out like that, bridle gone, saddle skewered around. Running down there, Sierra found the horse shockingly bruised and torn and lame. One stirrup was smashed flat. And on the seat of the saddle the old wrangler found something that sent him tearing back to the bunkhouse to rouse the boys there, then on to the ranchhouse to fetch old Bill. And he showed them what he'd found—a message scratched in the leather with a jackknife or sharp bit of rock:

Hurt—ridge below spring—Tom-Tom.

"I knowed it!" Bill Brandley groaned. "I knowed it would happen! Hurt! We don't know how bad—or when. A week ago, mebbe, by the look of this buckskin!"

He flung long arms out at his stricken men. "What are we standin' here for?" he roared at them. "Get goin', Sierra! Fetch th' hosses up! An' you, Coot, run back an' tell ma to rustle bandages, medicine. She'll know what to pack. An', Wade, you bring that big tarpaulin from the wagon shed. We might have to swing th' poor lad between hosses to fetch him home if he's hurt bad!"

Every man jumped to do the bidding of old Bill. Before the sun had fully risen, they were on the trail. And ere it reached its zenith, they found what they were searching for!

Found Nate under that cliff to which he'd managed to drag himself, beside the ashes of the fire he'd kindled of dead grass and twigs that grew under the shelf. Found him battered almost beyond recognition. One leg was broken, and this, with Spartan fortitude, he'd splinted with

a branch of piñon, bound in place with his bridle reins!

He was conscious of them, but drifting into blessed oblivion now help had come. They swung him between two horses in the canvas they'd brought along, and plowed their slow way down the snowy trails to the Flying Star.

But it was only Nate's crushed and broken body that lay at the Flying Star while winter gripped the Rainbow range in its frozen hand. His heart, mind—his whole tortured spirit was still up in those ice-locked rims where the Red Mirage and his band fought, tooth and hoof, in the strangling death grip of cold and hunger!

Hour after hour, in his mind, Nate relived that chase, up one canyon, down another, across ridges, over bluffs, to his sickening fall, that agonizing moment while he lifted himself up by his horse's mane to scratch that message on the saddle. And hour after hour he could hear, as he had heard even through all the black oblivion, the voice of Carol Belle, shaming him, goading him up from that bed of pain:

"If I were a man I'd find some way to catch him—make him mine!"

But not once to the cowboys in their bedside visits, or to old Bill eternally dropping in, even to Ma Brandley in constant attendance on him, did Nate speak of the horse.

Winter wore on to the first touch of spring. Already the lowlands were flushed with green, though the rims and shadowed canyons still bore their burden of snow. Nate was on his feet again, pale, thin, with only a slight limp to remind him of the ordeal he'd undergone. And still silent about his plans, until that morning at breakfast with ma and Bill, when he quietly announced his intention of going back to the rims.

Old Bill's roar might have been heard on Tom-Tom. "Boy, are you *plumb* loco!"

"Not this time, Bill," Nate assured him. "I've been doin' a lot of thinkin' laid up here. It's been a hard fight for that stallion this winter. He'll be weak, starved thin. I believe I can go up there with three or four good horses, sharp-shod an' grained, an' run him down."

"Then"—Bill accepted the inevitable—"we'll all go up an' help. Get this crazy business over, once for all."

But Nate vetoed that firmly. His pale face set in the determination of a man who can take no help in a fight he was to win by himself, and he said: "This is my fight, Bill. I've got to do it alone."

BACK on the Rainbow Rims—his old camp site scraped free of snow, Nate took up the chase again. He had three strong horses, hoofs steel-rimmed and calked, and two bags of barley to keep them strong, while he alternated from one to the other to wear down the stallion.

Scouting around in the sparkling sunshine of that mid-March morning, he saw plenty of sign where the band had been. Great, snow-pitted areas where they'd pawed for grass. A crisscross of tracks where they'd ranged from Tom-Tom to the mouth of Rampart Canyon. And, near noon, riding up on one of the high lookouts, he sighted the band itself, grazing along a snow-free slope, not a hundred yards below him.

They hadn't seen him yet. And his eyes swept over the mustangs, ragged, thin, their shaggy winter coats blowing up in the wind, to the wild leader—just as ragged and thin, but with a kingly presence that blotted out even such cruel signs of his long travail.

But now, as some vagrant breath of the fickle March wind carried the human scent to him, the stallion's head jerked up, his eyes across that space met Nate's, and a start ran through him. Nate could have sworn the horse knew him! Knew the battle was on again! Knew, too, the odds against him! Almost, it seemed to Nate, he saw the horse brace his ravaged body for that conflict. But there was no weak note in the ringing peal of defiance the stallion sent echoing through those wild cliffs as he wheeled after his startled band!

Touching steel to his horse, Nate flashed in hot pursuit, down a slope and along a wind-swept canyon wall, leading through more open country to the far side of the rims. The band passed from sight long before he emerged in the open, but their tracks plainly showed in the slush and mud, and he followed them.

Followed through mud and slush, over treacherous ice glares, still unmelted. On wherever there was a fleeing horse to glimpse or a track to follow. Often there was nothing but long stretches where snow had melted on south slopes, or been swept clean by wind, so the horses left no sign. And this land which Nate had learned so well last fall was now strangely unfamiliar, altered by clinging drifts and snow-filled crevices. So that time and again he was lost, and spent hours getting his bearings, knowing the Red Mirage was taking advantage of these respites to catch his breath for the next run.

But doggedly Nate kept on, following tracks where there were tracks, circling to find them where there were none, until his horse was stumbling from weariness. Then he returned to camp for a fresh mount, a bite to eat, and took up the chase again. Eventually dark drove him in, with two of his picked horses showing marked exhaustion and the Red Mirage still running strong!

The pearly pink light of the next morning found him on his last fresh horse while the other two rested. And this day was a repetition of the day before. The same crazy riding where, at every step, a man's horse might slip and fall, as Nate's horse did slip and fall many times. And it was only by divine Providence he wasn't rolled under as he'd been before. But a man couldn't think of things like that when running a wild horse down.

Running him down? Nate saw no sign of it. After two days of ceaseless pursuit, the Red Mirage seemed as strong as ever. And Nate began to fear it was his own three well-fed, sharp-shod saddle horses that might be run down first. But he gained heart as the band steadily grew smaller, the mustangs dropping out, one by one, until at last the Red Mirage ran alone!

Forenoon of the fourth day, Nate saw signs that the horse was wearying. No longer was he a mirage to fade from view. Nate could keep him in sight now. And on the best of his string—the buckskin that had all but cost him his life, then saved it by taking that message home—Nate rallied every reserve of body and brain for this dash that would bring the victory!

Again the Red Mirage ran along Rampart Rim, heading across that open country toward Tom-Tom. Nate's spurs lifted the buckskin to wilder gallop, his heart leaping to see that, at last, he was pulling up on the stallion.

Steadily, Nate pulled closer. He reached for his rope, certain the victory was all but won!

BUT the stallion seemed to sense this, too. To rally every reserve of his own body and brain to circumvent the defeat he saw coming. Abruptly he swerved into one of the rock-walled gorges that doubled back through the rims, almost to the spot where Nate had taken up the chase that morning. And, following him, Nate wondered what the Mirage was up to. For in this gorge the snow still lay shoulder-deep.

But in the next breath Nate saw what the horse had in mind. For when he hit that snow he didn't flounder, but skimmed over it like a bird on wing!

"He knows that crust will hold him up!" Nate cried in despair. "Figures a horse an' rider might break through! If he's right, I'm licked!"

For he knew the Red Mirage, having learned this trick, would repeat it, when hard-pressed, as long as the snow lay on. And when it melted out of the canyons, Nate would have no more chance of catching him than he had last fall. As it was, his horses were all in, had to have rest. While they were resting, the Mirage would be resting, too; or, realizing his peace was forever threatened here, slip out of this range and be seen no more! It was now—or never!

It was *now!* For here the buckskin hit that crusted surface, and it held under him! Held, though at every step Nate felt it give. Held, while he got the last ounce of speed from his horse. But it wasn't enough! Imbued with new life by the blessed surcease of cold snow on hot, bleeding hoofs, the stallion was running away from him. Would fade in a moment, as he'd faded a hundred times before.

But no! For, racing out where the canyon spread to admit the warm, slanting rays of the spring sunshine, Nate saw him suddenly break through and plunge to his shoulders in the snow! Saw him rear—try to clamber on top again, with the crust breaking under his flailing fore hoofs like skim ice on a stream. And he cried under his breath:

"He can't buck that long—starved an' winded like he is!"

But what had befallen the stallion was Nate's lot, too. His own horse was breaking through, floundering belly-deep in snow, lunging and clawing in the furrow plowed by the red leader. And the stallion was still rising and falling, falling and rising, endlessly, his thin neck bowed in deathless determination. Fighting, with phenomenal endurance and will

for the thing he prized more than life—freedom!

"Flesh an' blood can't stand that long!" Nate panted to the flagging horse under him. "Not flesh an' blood wasted like his has been!"

No! Nor flesh and blood wasted by this grueling struggle under the weight of man and saddle. For now the buckskin was down. And Nate was going on foot, rope in hand, stumbling, falling, rising to his feet to fall again, cursing through the tears than ran down his face in a blinding stream, the horse that wouldn't give up. That lunged a scant hundred feet ahead of him, barely out of reach of his loop!

Nate heard his hoarse breaths coming back. Saw red stains on the ice cakes he trampled under. Stains not from bleeding hoofs alone. Oh, all ruddy flame had been the proud chest of the Red Mirage that first sunset on Rampart Canyon, that golden noon on Tom-Tom! But ruddier now—from cutting miles of frozen trail! Bright, gleaming red *that ran!* Yet, indomitably, he fought on. And, indomitably, Nate staggered after. How far he knew not, or how long.

So far, so long, his heart was bursting in his breast, the world a blur about him. And each time he fell he thought he'd never rise again. And then—

Almost before him he saw the end of the canyon! But a few yards of this white morass, then open ground. The Mirage would fade forever!

A few yards—yet in the next short yard of it the stallion slumped to his knees and sank at full length in the snow! Nate's own legs were buckling. But, rope feebly a-swing in nerveless hand, he threw himself forward to drop his loop about that outstretched neck. The very violence of the effort threw him off balance and he fell flat. But his hoarse promise crossed that less than fifteen feet of glistening white:

"In a minute . . . you . . . red devil! In a . . . minute I'll . . . be . . . up!"

BUT Nate wasn't up in a moment. Or several of them. And in this time the stallion, by a supreme effort, fought to his feet, and, finding some remaining atom of strength to draw on, broke through those last few yards to open ground! Nate watched him go, helpless to stop him, his eyes playing tricks.

For just beyond the fading Mirage he'd followed so far he seemed to see faces—familiar faces from the Flying Star. Old Sierra, Bill Brandley.

He saw Bill, on his rangy black, swoop down on the Red Mirage, lariat whirring! Saw his loop roll out, encircling the stumbling front feet of the stallion, and bring them crashing to earth! Saw the rancher spring down and tie him there, then come wallowing through the snow trail to him, shouting in high excitement:

"I caught him! I caught him for you, Nate! He walked right into my loop!"

Then Sierra was there, helping Bill lift Nate out of the snow, and they were supporting him between them out to the open, Sierra babbling the while:

"We brung your company up, Nate! You warn't at camp, but we didn't have far to look. Rode out on that ridge yonder an' seen you comin'—you an' th' Mirage here! Boy, your mighty task is over!"

But Nate didn't know what Sierra was saying, and didn't care! Seeing the Red Mirage, bound and helpless there! Seeing him, not as he'd seen him through all this pitiless chase—

as the mirage of his personal happiness! Nor as Bill and Sierra were seeing him—a heaving, gasping, foam-drenched wraith of a horse! No, Nate saw him as a glorious antagonist who had fought valiantly, then been cheated of victory. For he'd have got away if Bill hadn't happened along! And Nate saw, or thought he saw, deep in those great, intelligent eyes, glazed and torture-filmed, some light of scorn that he—Nate—had, in his moment of defeat, called in help! And shame ran through him. He turned on Bill Brandley, crying in unreasoning fury:

"Why did you catch him? I told you I had to do it alone! Take them ropes off! Let him go!"

"Let him go?" The rancher was thunderstruck. "After you've been through hell to get him? You're flighty, Nate!"

"I've been flighty, all right!" cried the boy brokenly. "But I ain't any more. I thought he'd buy me something I wanted, Bill. But I can't take it this way. Not, an' call myself a man!"

And as they stood, too dumfounded to do his bidding, he staggered over to the Red Mirage, knelt beside him, loosed those ropes himself, and stepped back, watching, while the wild king heaved to his feet and shied away.

Then, and only then, Nate was conscious of old Sierra's babbling:

"Reckon you didn't hear me, Nate. We brung your company up! Take a look behind Bill, thar!"

NATE looked, and thought his eyes were playing more tricks—seeing a slight, little figure stepping from behind the Flying Star rancher, sombrero fallen back from golden hair, eyes blue stars of tearful contrition, looking at him, like—the thought was Sierra's:

"Like"—thought that romantic old wrangler—"Nate wasn't just an ordinary mortal, but a knight in shinin' armor!"

And, discreetly, he nudged Bill out of hearing of those broken words that tumbled from the lips of Carol Belle:

"Oh, Nate," the girl was crying, "I had to come when I got Ma's letter about your accident. She kept it from me till you went back to the rims again, and she was afraid— Oh, it was all my fault! I never dreamed you'd take that promise seriously. You might have been killed—just to catch that horse!"

"I didn't catch him," protested the boy dazedly. "Bill did. I wasn't —man enough."

"You were man enough to let him go," declared Carol Belle, "and that counts more!"

Nate was more dazed than ever. "But you said you wanted him."

The girl's cheeks flamed. "You don't want the moon or the stars—" she reminded him falteringly. "What I wanted was an excuse to come back. And you—Nate, you wouldn't say anything. So I . . . I—" She broke off in pretty confusion.

But something in her voice seemed to rout the last vestige of winter and spring, to cause the rims to burst forth in all their dazzling colors, the sun to shine with August force, the rocks to burgeon flowers!

"You'll stay?" Nate put that question to her tensely. "Not just July and August, but *always*, Carol?"

And over the answer Carol Belle gave him there came, from the wild heights beyond, the thin, sweet whistle of the Red Mirage calling to his scattered band.

THE END.

RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Lumbering in the great Northwest is classed among the most dangerous occupations in the United States. The biggest pay in the woods goes to the high climber. His job is so fraught with danger that he never knows which tree may be his last. Up he goes to the dizziest heights, trims, tops, and rigs up his tree, making it a job of only a few minutes. But what minutes! If his ax strikes a few inches off aim, it may mean the severing of his life belt. Moreover, how can he tell that the tree won't split and spread as the top falls, crushing out his life against the trunk? So many and varied are the hazards that lurk in timber that a man must truly be a master at his craft if he wants to survive in the long-log country.

Although their regular route covered about seventy-five miles, pony-express riders, due to some emergency, often would have to double this, replacing the man on the next run.

The greatest case of emergency riding was perhaps done by Buffalo Bill, as has often been recounted, when the rider for the next division was killed. Buffalo Bill was called upon to cover this man's eighty-five-mile route, besides his own.

He reached all the stations on time, and made the round trip, a total of three hundred and twenty miles, on schedule. This is the longest pony-express trip made by one man.

For such work as this, he was paid about a hundred dollars a month.

That showy flower so high in popular interest, the dahlia, originated in Mexico. In 1570, Philip II, of Spain, sent Francisco Hernandez to the Western continent to compile an official report on the flora that flourished in New Spain.

Hernandez found the dahlia growing not as a wild flower, but in the cultivated gardens of the Aztecs, who called the two main varieties *Acocotli* and *Cocoxalochitl.* Seeds were sent to the Royal Botanical Gardens in Madrid, and the dahlia was disseminated throughout Europe.

The dahlia's name came from Andreas Dahl, a botanist, for his ardent interest in the flower. And now, throughout the great West, the dahlia is one of the gems of floral beauty.

Contrary to popular belief, a bear does not sit on a bank, wait until a fish darts past, and suddenly scoop it up on the bank. The speed and alertness of the average fish alone dispute this old belief.

However, a bear does fish and his technique is most interesting. He will plunge into a stream and forage down the middle of it until he gets to a pool. With a great splash Mr. Bruin will plunge into the pool, frightening the salmon or other fish. When the fish, trying to escape, reach shallow water, the bear pounces upon them. He uses his paws to corral the prey, but once that is accomplished, he picks up the fish in his mouth and wades ashore to eat it.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

BY JAMES B. HENDRYX

CHAPTER I

"GET RAYBORNE!"

INSPECTOR BLAKE, in command of the Dawson detachment of the Northwest Mounted Police, looked up from his desk and studied the tall young officer who had just stepped into his office.

"MacLean," he said abruptly, "I understand you're from Saskatoon. Ever hear of anyone named Rayborne—Joseph Rayborne? Ought to be about your age."

Constable James MacLean's gray eyes were inquiring. His answer came a little reluctantly. "If you mean Red Rayborne, sir—I know him. He was accused of robbing a store a few years ago, and skipped out. I haven't heard of him since then."

"Well, you're hearing of him now. And since you're the only man here who knows him, it's up to you to bring him in."

"Bring him in?" MacLean's surprise was apparent. "You mean on that old burglary charge. Or has he been up to something else?"

"According to Corporal Jasper's report, it looks as though he's been up to plenty. The Eureka Dredge Co.'s outfit on Baxter Creek was robbed night before last. The watchman was knocked on the head and ten hundred and forty ounces of gold taken from the strong room. And it

looks as though Rayborne is the man who did it."

"Did the watchman identify him?"

"No one will ever know the answer to that one," Blake said grimly. "The watchman was dead when they found him in the morning."

"Murder, eh? Somehow I can't picture Red as a murderer."

"Friend of yours?" asked the inspector, eying the young officer sharply.

MacLean grinned. "Hardly. We were in school together, and I guess we fought as much as any two kids ever fought. Joe was a red-headed fightin' fool—and it seemed that I was his particular private enemy—why, the devil only knew. He was always laying for me, behind fences, in alleys, around the corner of lumber piles, down at the swimming hole—anywhere and everywhere. He'd sail into me, and we'd hammer each other till one of us would holler 'enough.' Then the next time he saw me it would be the same thing all over again."

The inspector smiled. "Well, here's your chance to get even."

Constable MacLean shook his head: "No, I don't hold any grudge against him. I guess I licked him as often as he licked me. We were about of a size—sometimes one would win, and sometimes the other. It was mostly a matter of luck. We were about evenly matched. But if Red Rayborne or anyone else murdered a man for the purpose of robbery, I'll be mighty glad of the chance to bring him in."

Inspector Blake nodded. "Sure, lad—I know. I was only joking about evening up the score." He handed the constable the paper he had been studying. "Better go over Jasper's report pretty thoroughly, and then get on the job. You're relieved of all other duty until further notice. Get this man Rayborne and bring him in."

"Yes, sir."

As the constable turned to leave the room, Blake eyed him gravely. "MacLean," he said, "if there is any reason why you'd rather not accept this detail—any sentimental reason or anything like that—just tell me and I'll understand. Take time to think it over. But remember—sentiment's got no place in police work. That's all now. See me after you've gone over Jasper's report."

"Yes, sir." MacLean took the paper and retired to the tiny room he shared with another constable.

REMOVING his coat and shoes, MacLean filled and lighted his pipe, touched a match to the wick of the kerosene lamp and seated himself in an armchair.

For a moment his eyes rested upon the paper he had tossed onto the table. But they took no heed of Corporal Jasper's report. What they saw was a red-headed, freckle-faced boy with pale blue eyes and shirt tail protruding from a hole in the seat of his pants like a bedraggled mule's ear, who lurked in unsuspected places to pounce out and engage him in bitter combat. MacLean's lips twisted into a wry grin at recollection of the hurt of knobby fists driven against his nose and cheeks, and the pit of his stomach, and the momentary pyrotechnic displays that preceded black eyes. And the grin widened at recollection of the thrills that had accompanied the feel of his own fists landing hard against vulnerable spots of the Rayborne anatomy. Especially did he enjoy recalling the time that Red spit out the big front tooth after a particularly telling blow.

But, try as he would, James MacLean could think of no reason for

this warfare. He could recall no mortal hatred for the redhead with the shirt tail sticking out of the seat of his pants. Nor could he think of any provocation for Red's bitter hatred of him.

He recollected occasional fights with other boys—but he and Red Rayborne *always* fought. Always, it seemed, Red Rayborne was "laying for him." He couldn't remember "laying" for Red. In fact he could recall occasions when he had made long and devious detours to avoid spots where he suspected the red-headed one might be lurking, rather than incur the righteous wrath of his thrifty Scotch mother for messing up his Sunday clothes.

Then MacLean's lips tightened at the memory of a certain hot day, and the gang of brown-bodied boys swimming in the river—of the flash of mortal terror that gripped him as he realized that he was being carried beyond his depth—that he couldn't fight the current.

With awful distinctness he could see the terrified, spindle-legged figures running helplessly along the bank shouting advice he couldn't hear, could feel the water engulfing him, filling his lungs, humming in his ears. Then, as his terrified effort held his head above the surface for a few moments, a figure had approached along the hard-packed path that led through the wire grass to the swimming hole, bare legs working like pistons, broken-visored cap awry on the shock of red hair, one suspender strap flying out behind. All strength had seemed to leave Jim's arms and legs, and the water again closed over his head as a lean body shot straight toward him in a running dive. After that nausea, retching and a splitting headache—a ring of white, scared faces, and the red-headed one standing over him belligerently demanding "Ya all right, now?" But he wasn't all right—he was sick and weak. And he was still sick and weak when the redhead finally lost patience, gave him a couple of good punches in the jaw, and let it go at that.

MacLean's grin returned at the recollection of how he had evened up the score on another day when the gang was playing at coupling cars on the railroad siding. Red, scorning to use a stick to lift the link of the old-fashioned pin-and-link coupling, was a mite too slow, and got his hand caught between the bumpers as the two empty freight cars came together.

MacLean recalled the wide-eyed terror in the faces of the other boys as they gave one look and scurried around the corner of the grain elevator. He himself had clambered up the ladder of the freight car and released the hand brake so that the car rolled slowly down the sloping siding for a few feet, releasing the imprisoned hand. Then he had scurried back down the iron-runged ladder, had twisted his handkerchief about the redhead's wrist with a spike, and taken him to the doctor, who scolded them both for playing around the railroad. The middle finger of Red's right hand had had to be amputated and at the doctor's orders MacLean had held the chloroform over the boy's white, freckled face.

The two of them had left the doctor's little wooden office together, Red sick from the chloroform and his arm in a sling and his fist swathed in bandages. MacLean had challenged the redhead to fight, and when he found there was no fight left in him he had given him a couple of punches and a kick in the pants and let it go at that.

THEN one night a store was burglarized, and the authorities and the townspeople blamed it on Red Rayborne, who promptly disappeared. Thus had the redhead passed from MacLean's ken. And now, with the passing of the years, they were again pitted against each other. But this time the issue was plain—Red Rayborne was a murderer and a robber, and he, Jim MacLean, was a policeman.

He knew Red Rayborne would never tamely submit to arrest. There would be one more fight—only one—for this would be a fight to a finish. If Rayborne won this one, the name of MacLean, James, Reg. No. 04837, would be stricken from the roll of the Northwest Mounted Police, with the brief notation, "Killed in line of duty," and someone else would carry on.

If he won—well, he might have to kill the redhead, but not if he could take him alive. If that happened, Red Rayborne would undoubtedly be hanged, and MacLean knew that he would be sorry for that; he would take no pride in a job well done. The words of Inspector Blake flashed into his mind: "If there's any reason why you'd rather not accept this detail—any sentimental reason—I'll understand." MacLean's teeth clamped tightly upon his cold pipe stem, and he picked up the paper from the table, the report of Corporal Jasper on the Eureka Dredge Co. robbery.

Relighting his pipe, he concentrated on the tersely worded, clear-cut statement. He read that on the morning of October 28th, workmen going on shift found the body of the night watchman lying in front of the strong room, the door of which had been forced with an iron crowbar.

Investigation showed that the man had suffered a skull fracture on the right side of the head just above and behind the ear. The fracture was evidently the result of a blow from a blunt instrument, undoubtedly a pick handle which was found nearby. Several hairs, which microscopic scrutiny disclosed matched in color and texture the hair of the dead man, were found sticking to the pick handle which also disclosed bloodstains and a perfect set of prints—four fingers and the thumb of a right hand. Fingerprints, somewhat blurred, of both a right and left hand were found on the iron crowbar, the prints of the right hand being, insofar as it was possible to ascertain, identical with the prints found on the pick handle.

The workmen who found the body said that a Mrs. Marie Johnson, the wife of a dredge engineer, told them that she had seen Joe Rayborne, a fireman on the dredge, run past her bedroom window sometime between two and three o'clock in the morning. Rayborne reported for duty before the workmen had had time to notify the authorities. When a detail of police accused him of the murder and attempted to hold him, he knocked two of them down and fled.

When Corporal Jasper arrived, later in the day, the woman repeated her story to him, stating that she could not have been mistaken in the identity of the man, Rayborne, as she was well acquainted with him and had seen his face distinctly in the bright moonlight. She was troubled by insomnia, she explained, and was sitting at the window, wide awake, when the man had passed, only a few feet from her. His face had had a tense, strained expression, she said, and he was carrying a heavy bundle of some kind in his arms and was running from the direction of the strong room. The

check-up revealed that ten hundred and forty ounces of gold dust had been removed from the room.

The report also showed that two men, Allison and Jones, who were well acquainted with Rayborne, had met him between ten and eleven o'clock that morning on the Dawson Trail, some twelve miles below Baxter Creek, and that he was carrying a pack and had hurried past without returning their greeting.

Constable MacLean's lips tightened grimly as he put on his shoes and coat and hunted up the inspector.

"I'm goin' after Rayborne," he announced tersely. "And I'll keep after him till I bring him in."

The inspector nodded. "Good luck, and watch your step. Remember, a man with one murder to answer for has nothing to lose by committing another. You'll be off the first thing in the morning?"

"I'll be off within half an hour," MacLean declared. "I'm going up to Baxter Creek and have a talk with this Mrs. Johnson, and Allison and Jones. Then I'll hit out after Rayborne."

CHAPTER II

MAC LEAN BREAKS TRAIL

EARLY-MORNING inquiry directed Constable MacLean to one of the frame shacks that housed the employees of the Eureka Dredge Co. on Baxter Creek. His knock was answered by a walrus-mustached man who, fork in hand, had apparently just turned from the stove upon which strips of bacon sizzled in a frying pan.

"Come on in," the man invited, stepping aside. "I s'pose ye're up here about the murder. There was another policeman here the day they found the feller. My wife told him what she seen."

MacLean nodded and stepped into the tiny kitchen, noting that the table pushed against the wall was set with only one place. "Yes," he replied. "Is your wife home? I'd like to question her further."

The man frowned. "If she was here I wouldn't be cookin' my own breakfast—blast her!"

"Where is she?"

"She's headin' outside—an' to blazes with her! Ever sence it begun gittin' cold she's be'n bellyachin' about the weather. What does she think the Yukon is—Floridy? When we come here in June she claimed she was goin' to like the country. But quick as it started gittin' cold, she begun kickin'. Then talkin' with some of the other wimmin that told her how cold it kin git here, onct winter sets in fer good, scairt her out. Hang it, I don't like cold weather no better'n what she does, but they claim it ain't so bad if ye're dressed fer it. I jest about had her talked into stickin' it out when this murder come off, an' she told that there Corporal Jasper what she seen. Then she got scairt that Rayborne would hang around somewheres an' knock her off fer squealin', an' when someone said there was a boat due to pull out up river yesterday, she hit fer Dawson the afternoon before so's to be sure not to miss her, on account they claimed it would prob'ly be the last one out this fall."

MacLean frowned. "Corporal Jasper reported that your wife told him she saw Rayborne running past her window sometime between two and three o'clock in the morning, and that the body of the watchman was found by workmen going on shift."

"That's right," Johnson said, forking over the bacon in the pan.

"What time do they go on shift?"

"Seven o'clock."

"And Jasper came over from Ophir Creek and got here about ten?"

"I don't know where he come from, but I guess it was about ten, all right, when he got here."

"And in the meantime your wife had told the workmen about seeing Rayborne."

"Sure. She told 'em as quick as she found out what had come off. They tried to hold Rayborne but he knocked a couple of 'em down. He run to his shack an' stood the others off with a gun while he throw'd his stuff in a pack sack, an' then he beat it. Couple of fellas seen him on the trail headin' fer Dawson."

MacLean nodded. "How'd your wife happen to be up at that time of the mornin'?"

"Oh, she claimed she couldn't sleep. She's up lots of nights. Sets there by the winder an' sniffles about how cold it's goin' to git this winter, an' how we ain't goin' to be able to keep warm in this shack, an' whatever else she kin think up to bellyache about next mornin'. Anyways, with her gone, I ain't got to listen to that all winter."

"Jasper reported that Rayborne was a fireman. Did he fire your dredge?"

"Yeah," Johnson answered. "He was a good fireman, too. The bohunk I got on there now can't keep her hot more'n an hour to a time."

"How'd you like Rayborne? What sort of a fellow was he?"

"Oh, he was all right. Didn't have much to say but I never figgered he'd pull nothin' like that. Still, you can't never tell about fellers like that."

"I'd like to take a look out the window where your wife sat when she saw Rayborne run past," MacLean said.

Johnson nodded toward a closed door. "In there—in the bedroom. Jest help yerself. I got to throw this grub into me an' beat it. Got to go on shift in thirty-five minutes."

That the woman had indeed left for good was evidenced by the fact that, except for a few obviously discarded bits of clothing, no feminine wearing apparel was in sight, either in the little closet curtained off in a corner of the room, or in the drawers of the cheap dresser.

MACLEAN departed, and after a short interview with the two men who had met Rayborne on the trail he returned to Dawson to find that the *Sarah* had departed the day before for Whitehorse, and that a Mrs. Marie Johnson had taken passage on her. No red-headed man answering Rayborne's description had been included among the passengers.

Late that evening MacLean found a man who had sold a canoe to a red-headed man two days before. The redhead had paid for the canoe in dust and had departed down river with a rather heavy pack sack about four o'clock that same afternoon.

"Figures on hittin' out by way of Alaska," Inspector Blake decided, when MacLean reported to him late that evening. "Well, keep after him. I'll fix you up with the necessary papers. It's simpler to get the American authorities to make the arrest if you have to follow him across the line. He's got three ways to get into Alaska below here. He can either follow on down the Yukon and take a chance on slipping past at Eagle, or he can hit up Fortymile or Birch Creek."

"I'll keep after him," MacLean promised grimly. "My canoe outfit's all ready an' I'll be pulling out

at daylight. I'd go tonight, if it hadn't clouded up."

But Constable MacLean did not pull out at daylight. For in the morning huge fields of thin new ice splotched the surface of the Yukon, and the north wind was filled with cold flinty snow that bit into exposed flesh and reduced visibility to a minimum.

The blizzard raged for three days, and for several more days MacLean waited impatiently for the ice to thicken sufficiently to support a light-loaded dog sled. The run to Fortymile was made in three days —good time considering the dangerous condition of the new river ice. There the constable learned that the red-headed fugitive had remained in camp during the blizzard and had departed the day it let up after purchasing a six-dog outfit and a supply of grub which he had paid for in dust.

Replenishing his grub supply, MacLean struck out on the trail of the six-dog team which headed across the river and up the Fortymile. His own dogs, fresh and intractable after their long summer's idleness, were quarrelsome and hard to handle. MacLean comforted himself, however, with the thought that Rayborne's dogs were also hitched up for the first time since spring, and it was almost certain that the redhead had had little experience in handling a dog outfit, while he himself had had plenty of experience during the two past winters.

Twice before MacLean camped that night, the tracks in the snow showed where Rayborne had had trouble—once where his sled had overturned on a sliding trail and rolled, dragging the dogs with it some forty feet where it brought up among the rocks at the edge of an open rapid. MacLean estimated that Rayborne must have spent at least three hours releasing the dogs, untangling the harness, packing the load, and pulling the sled back up onto the trail. And again, at the foot of a steep declivity, blood and jumbled tracks showed that the sled had evidently overrun the dogs starting a fight that had again tangled the harness and resulted in injury to at least one dog.

THAT night MacLean camped near the pole and mud shack of a prospector who told him that a redheaded chechahco had camped there the night before last, that he had two green dogs in his team, and two others that had been crippled in a fight. He said the man had talked

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little, and had pulled out early the following morning. The constable smiled. He had gained a full day on Rayborne.

At noon the next day, MacLean was surprised to find that the redhead had left the river trail and headed up a long, sparsely timbered slope toward a low divide. As he swung into the man's trail, MacLean smiled grimly.

CONSTABLE MacLEAN

"He knew a policeman would talk to that prospector and learn that he was heading up the Fortymile, so he took a chance that it would snow and cover his trail and the officer would go on up the river—maybe clear to Chicken before he found out he wasn't on the river. Red isn't so dumb, for a chechahco, because if this trail had been snowed under, that's just what I'd have done—and lost maybe a week. Red probably figures on cutting across to Birch Creek—but, believe me, he's going to find plenty of rough going before he gets there, without even a trail to follow."

Later in the day MacLean found where the fleeing man had stopped to boil tea and turn a dog loose, evidently one of the two injured in the fight.

MacLean forced the trail and that night he camped, estimating that he had gained another half day. The next day, and the one following were repetitions of the first. The sign showed that Rayborne was having his troubles. At one place just below a rapid on a creek he had blundered into slush ice that had necessitated a halt for a change of clothing. Again, chips and whittlings and the lopped branches of a green spruce sapling showed that he had stopped for sled repair of some kind. Minor misadventures, but they spelled delay, and as MacLean pulled out early on the morning of the fifth day, he figured that the redhead was only half a day ahead of him. It clouded up, and by midmorning there was snow in the air. Shortly before noon MacLean came upon Rayborne's camp of the night before, verifying his estimate of the man's half-day lead.

Snow continued to fall, not steadily but in fitful, blinding flurries that threatened to obliterate the trail of the fleeing man. The going became rougher. Windfalls jammed the narrow ravine of the creek bed, and open rapids necessitated detours along the sloping hillside.

At dusk MacLean camped on a ledge beside a rapid, confident that before noon of the following day he would come up with Red Rayborne. As he unharnessed the dogs, he wondered whether Red would resist arrest. He chopped some dry wood, unlashed his sled pack, lighted his fire and, pail in hand, stepped onto the steep ten-foot slant to the water, unheeding the fact that the newfallen snow concealed a treacherous footing of slippery rock.

CHAPTER III

A BENEFACTOR

WHEN MacLean opened his eyes and started again it was to find himself staring upward at the black spruce slopes that towered above him to the sky where the pale light of a half moon filtered between scudding clouds. He was conscious only of extreme bodily discomfort. His head ached intolerably, and his legs from the waist down seemed cramped in a huge vise that was slowly crushing them. His whole body was in the grip of a deadly chill, and he turned his head to see water gurgling about his hips. He tried to move and finally after what seemed æons of intense concentration he succeeded in raising himself on an elbow.

Gradually realization dawned on him. He had started for a pail of water—that was the last thing he remembered. He must have lost his footing and fallen into the creek. He tried to drag himself from the water that engulfed him from his hips down, but found that save for the cramping pain, his legs were numb. Finally, after vast effort, he succeeded in drawing them clear of the water, and little by little by dint of intense mental concentration he was finally able to move them.

It took a quarter of an hour of agonizing labor to gain the ledge where a little pile of white ashes surrounded by glowing ends of spruce sticks was all that remained of his fire. But it was not the fire that held Constable MacLean's attention as he rested on hands and knees at the top of the steep declivity; it was the absence of his dogs, and the scattered remains of his sled pack that littered the new-fallen snow.

In vain he tried to rise to his feet, but his legs buckled under him and he sprawled into the snow with his head almost in the ashes of his dying fire. With his hands he scraped the glowing ends together, and finally succeeded in blowing them into a flame. He added sticks from his meager supply of split wood, and when the flames shot up, held his numb hands to the grateful heat. Crawling to his bedroll, he unlashed a blanket and with stiff, clumsy fingers finally managed to take off his pacs and socks.

When feeling returned to his numb feet he removed his trousers and underclothing and, wrapping himself in his blanket, sat close to his fire, feeding it from the little pile of wood at his elbow. Gingerly, muscle by muscle, bone by bone, he checked himself over. A lump as big as a goose egg on the back of his head seemed to be the only hurt he had sustained, the numbness and the cramping pains having been due to the deadly chill of the ice water in which he had lain half submerged for what he figured by the condition of his fire must have been two hours.

Procuring clothing from his duffel bag, MacLean dressed, chopped more wood, and by the light of the leaping flames, surveyed his scattered belongings. He mentally berated himself for not toggling the dogs as soon as he had unharnessed them. The brutes had made a thorough job of it; not one ounce of grub remained. Their powerful jaws had even wrenched the cover from his tea can, and scattered the contents over the trampled snow. Then they had apparently stampeded.

MACLEAN made his bed, slanted his shelter tarp to reflect the heat from the fire onto it, and crawled between his blankets. Gradually the warmth drove the chill from his body and he slept. He

awoke at daylight, ravenously hungry. He had skipped his noonday meal the day before in the hope of overtaking Rayborne before nightfall, and after he had recovered consciousness, the splitting headache, the cramping pains in his muscles, and the deadly chill that seemed to strike into his very bones had driven all thought of hunger from his mind.

His head had stopped aching, but as he sat erect in his blankets he became painfully conscious that his chill-cramped muscles were stiff and sore. Also, he was just beginning to realize the extreme gravity of his position. He had eaten nothing in twenty-four hours, ten of which had been spent in forcing the trail. He laced his pacs, got to his feet, and examined the wreckage of his trail outfit in a vain hope that some bit of food had been left by the dogs.

From force of habit he started to build a fire, then smiled grimly and kicked the little pile of twigs into the snow. Of what use was a fire if he had nothing to cook? He must go on—and go fast. Any thought of hitting the back trail vanished with the realization that the prospector's shack on the Fortymile was three fast days on the back trail—and MacLean well knew that he could not travel for three days without food. His only chance of survival lay in overtaking Rayborne—and in overtaking him while he still had the strength to overpower him.

MacLean's lips closed grimly as he glanced down at his service revolver in its holster. Making a light pack of two heavy blankets and his shelter tarp, he tightened his belt, and struck off on the trail, thanking his stars that the snow flurries of the day before had not quite succeeded in obliterating it. Two hours later he came upon the camp Rayborne had made the night before.

The stiffness had gone from MacLean's muscles, but he was aware of a certain lassitude, a consciousness that he was driving himself only by an effort of will. Taking up another hole in his belt, he pushed on. If Rayborne should stop for a noonday meal he could gain an hour, and after that any mishap the man might have—even a slight delay—would bring him up with him. If there was no delay, he would overtake Rayborne at his night camp about the time he was preparing his evening meal—if he could drive his weakening muscles to a pace that matched Rayborne's. Thought of that evening meal of Rayborne's drove him on—salt pork sizzling in the pan—beans, maybe—flapjacks, or bannocks, or pilot bread, washed down with great swallows of scalding tea!

But no mishap overtook Rayborne. MacLean came upon the man's noon camp, the warm ashes of a tiny tea fire. The redhead had not unharnessed his dogs—had just boiled a pail of tea to wash down his cold snack.

As the afternoon wore on, MacLean knew that his pace had slowed, but try as he would he could not increase it. Utter weariness gripped him. His pack seemed too heavy for him to carry. Again and again he stumbled and fell, each time regaining his feet with an effort. His hunger-weakened muscles had lost their drive.

Twilight deepened and one by one the stars appeared, gleaming coldly, and illuminating the scene with a pale, cold light that showed the fresh trail going on and on—crossing low divides, following the interminable wanderings of creeks.

Rayborne's fire was long cold when a figure, slowly and mechanically placing one foot before the other, blundered past five toggled

dogs that growled and snarled as they strained at the tethers, to trip over a blanketed form and lie still with its face in the snow.

CONSCIOUSNESS came slowly to MacLean. A dozen times he opened his eyes to stare about the tiny room—at the dirt-covered pole roof, the pole and mud chinking of the walls, the little Yukon stove, the rude table cluttered with tin dishes. His eyes would close, and as he strove to orient himself, to reason out where he was and why he was here, he would drift off into a hazy half-oblivion in which interminable snow trails were somehow inextricably mixed up with fist fights in which a redhead with freckled face and his shirt tail sticking out through a hole in the seat of his pants was pummeling him unmercifully. He would move uneasily to rid himself of the pain, but it would only hurt the more, and his eyes would open again to stare at the pole walls, the table cluttered with dishes, and the little Yukon stove.

Finally MacLean's eyes remained open, and recollection gradually dispelled the fog. He was on the trail of Red Rayborne; he must overtake him and arrest him for a murder on Baxter Creek. His dogs had stampeded after rifling his pack and he was pushing on and on. He must overtake Red Rayborne or starve to death there on the trail. But where was Red Rayborne? And why was he himself in a pole cabin? He sat up, wincing at the torturing pains in his muscles. He remembered he had been hungry—so hungry he was growing weak—but he didn't seem to be hungry now, yet he couldn't remember eating anything.

The cabin door opened suddenly and a bearded face was thrust into the room. The new arrival smiled as he stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

"Come to, eh? We figgered you would when you got caught up on yer rest. You was all in. We tried

RED RAYBORNE

to git some soup down you, but it wasn't no use. You couldn't even swaller a shot of likker—jest kind of gagged it out. But we couldn't find nothin' wrong with you except you was dang near starved."

At mention of soup, MacLean became acutely conscious of the delicious aroma that permeated the air of the tiny cabin, and he suddenly realized that he had never been so hungry in his life. His eyes sought the stove on the top of which a kettle simmered, sending tiny puffs of steam out from under the lid.

"I'll take a chance on that soup now," he said, passing his hand across his forehead as though to brush away the last remaining cobweb from his brain. "And some meat and beans and spuds and—"

The other laughed. "You kin have all them things when the time comes. But ye're goin' to start out on soup, an' when that's wore off a

little, you kin begin on the rest. But you got to take it slow." Taking a bottle from a shelf, he poured some liquor into a cup and handed it to the constable. "Better kinda tune up with this," he said, "an' I'll dish you out a pan of soup."

"How'd I get here?" MacLean asked, after he had downed a gulp of the fiery liquor.

FELLER fetched you," the man explained. "Red-headed feller, he was. Claimed he found you layin' in the snow. Figgered you musta had bad luck an' lost yer outfit—all but yer tarp an' a couple of blankets. We figgered you must be lost, 'cause it's the first time I ever seen any of the Mounted this side the line."

"This side the line!" MacLean exclaimed. "You mean I'm on the American side?"

"Shore thing. This here's Muddy Crick—runs into Birch Crick. Line's back about four mile the way you come."

"Is he still here—the man who brought me in?" MacLean asked, as the other set a pan of steaming broth on the table and helped him from the bunk.

"No, he went on. Said he wanted to git over on Birch Crick an' locate him a claim."

MacLean finished his broth in silence and glanced expectantly toward the stove. "Where's all the rest of that grub we were talking about? I could eat a moose—hoofs, horns an' all!"

"Mebbe you could but you ain't goin' to—not in the shape ye're in. I'll give you another pan of this here caribou soup if ye're still hungry, but you gotta go easy on the rest of the stuff. If the soup sets good on yer stummick an' takes holt, then 'long about night you kin eat some solid stuff."

"That's nonsense," MacLean protested. "I can—"

"You wouldn't think it was nonsense if you was all doubled up with stummick cramps," interrupted the other. "Dang it, you're a policeman! Don't they learn you how to start in feedin' folks you find starvin'?"

"Yes, but I'm not starvin'?"

"You wasn't far from it when that fella fetched you in yesterday noon. He claimed you'd been onconscious since the night before, an' you was shore as shootin' onconscious till you woke up a while ago. Use yer head an' take it easy today. Then tonight you kin throw some solid grub into you, an' in the mornin' you'd ort to be in pretty good shape ag'in."

"All right," MacLean replied with a wry grin. "You're the doctor. An' I guess you're about right, at that. I do feel a little weak. Is there an American marshal on Birch Creek?"

"Nope. Ain't no marshal no closter'n Eagle—an' he's only a dipity—an' so dang fat and lazy he don't never git no more'n a whoop an' a holler from Jud's saloon."

"Is there a tradin' post on Birch Creek? I've got to get an outfit."

"Yeah. Frenchman name of Joe Bedore's got a kind of a store at the mouth of Muddy Crick 'bout six mile from here. There's a pretty good trail down the crick. You can't miss it."

MacLean rested during the day and in the evening he consumed an enormous quantity of boiled caribou meat, baked beans, and bannocks. After a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast, he felt fit as ever as he bid good-by to his benefactor.

"Ye're welcome to all I done!" the man assured him. "The one you want to thank is that red-headed feller that fetched you in. Hadn't been fer him you'd be layin' some-

wheres out in the bush froze to an icicle by now."

"That's right," MacLean replied. "I'll look him up, if I can find him on Birch Creek, and try to return the favor."

CHAPTER IV

SHOWDOWN ON BIRCH CREEK

IT was high noon when Constable MacLean halted the five dogs he had bought from Joe Bedore close beside a little cabin some three miles down the creek. Here, Bedore had told him, the red-headed man had settled.

The door of the cabin opened abruptly to MacLean's knock and he stood face to face with Red Rayborne. Seconds passed as the two stood eying each other in silence. At a glance, MacLean's eyes took in the breadth of shoulder, the long flat hips and sinewy leanness of the man before him, then centered on his face. The eyes were the same—pale blue, narrowed slightly, and cold as ice; the same snub nose and ruddy, freckled cheeks and neck, the same shock of carroty red hair. Almost MacLean would have bet that the redhead's shirt was sticking out like a mule's ear from a hole in the seat of his pants.

Rayborne was the first to speak. "So—you came on, eh?"

"Sure. You knew I'd come on."

The other nodded slightly. "Yeah. Well—come in. No use lettin' the shack get cold. I'm cookin' dinner. You et?"

"Not since breakfast. Wait till I toggle my dogs. They might take a notion to stampede."

Rayborne waited till the other had secured the dogs, then led the way into the shack. "It won't be so bad when I get her fixed up a little," he explained. "Goin' to cut another window, if I can. Fella abandoned this claim an' I'm relocatin' it."

"You're goin' back with me first, Red," MacLean said. "Back to Dawson."

The other stuck a piece of wood in the stove and gave the frying pan a shake. "That's what you think. But this is American territory here. You ain't got no authority."

"I'm taking the authority. Once I get you back across the line, what are they goin' to do about it?"

"You ain't takin' me back acrost no line. That is," Rayborne drawled, with a glance at the revolver in the other's holster, "unless you kill me."

MacLean frowned. "You knew I'd keep on till I got you," he said. "If you didn't want to go back, why didn't you leave me there in the snow?"

Rayborne shrugged without looking up from the frying pan into which he was placing more meat. "Mebbe I should've. Same reason you didn't run off with the rest of the kids, that time, an' leave me with my hand fast between them two box cars, I guess."

MacLean nodded. "And the same reason you pulled me out of the river that day, when the other kids was afraid to—so you could knock hell out of me when I came to."

"Yeah, an' I'll knock hell out of you again, too," Red threatened, "if you try to take me back there to get hung fer a murder I didn't have no more to do with than you did. . . . An' besides, you knocked the devil out of me when the doctor had my hand in a sling."

"That's right," MacLean agreed, "and I'll prob'ly have to do it now, to get you back to Dawson."

"You can't do it. You never could."

"You're a liar! I've licked you as often as you ever licked me!"

Rayborne turned and faced him. "You ain't takin' me back, Mac—without you shoot me first."

MACLEAN drew his revolver from its holster and, stepping to the door, tossed it out into the snow. Then he closed the door and faced the redhead. "I'm taking you back and I'm not shooting you," he said flatly. "Do you want to peel your coat—or take it like you are?"

Rayborne took off his coat, and MacLean did likewise. The redheaded one glanced at the stove with its pan of sizzling meat and pail of tea. "Kinda cramped in here," he observed. "We're sure as shootin' goin' to knock that stove over an' prob'ly set the shack afire. It'd be a shame to waste that meat, too. Why the devil don't we eat first?"

"Suits me," MacLean replied.

The two ate in silence, and when they had finished, MacLean rose to his feet. "It's too bad to burn the shack an' all your stuff, Red," he said. "I'd just as soon step outside—if you've got the guts to. We'll have more room out there."

"Then come on!" Rayborne retorted. "We'll soon find out who's got the guts!" As they faced each other on the packed snow before the door of the cabin, he said acidly: "They musta learnt you somethin' in the Mounted. It's the first time I ever seen you with yer shirt buttoned up right."

"First time I ever saw you when your shirt tail wasn't sticking out through the seat of your pants, too! Take that, an' try it on your piano!" MacLean swung a hard right for the other's head. Rayborne took it on the shoulder and bored in, shooting rights and lefts to the officer's midsection. MacLean grunted as the blows landed, and managed to land short jabs to the face. Then both squared off and slugged, neither giving an inch. They were vicious, powerful blows that hurt when they landed. Blood flowed from a cut at the corner of MacLean's left eye and reddened his cheek. And a crimson stream flowed from Rayborne's nose.

Both men were breathing hard, but neither dared pause. MacLean felt dizzy and sick, and his arms were like lead. Rayborne's blows were landing with pistonlike regularity, beating down his guard. His own blows were landing, too. Rayborne's left eye was closed, and the officer grinned as the redhead blew a fine spray of blood from between battered lips. The grin evidently infuriated Rayborne, for he leaped forward as though to overpower the other.

MacLean sidestepped, slipping slightly on the snow but, recovering before Rayborne could regain his balance, he swung a right into which he put every ounce of his fast-ebbing power. The blow caught Rayborne just under the ear, and spun him halfway around. His arms dropped, and a glassy look came into his eyes. He tried to turn, slipped, and MacLean shot another that landed squarely on the point of the chin. Rayborne dropped like a polled ox.

Recovering his revolver, MacLean holstered it. Then, picking up the unconscious man, he carried him to his waiting sled, covered him with the blankets from his bunk, lashed him securely to the top of the load, and headed the dogs down Birch Creek.

CHAPTER V

A CLEAN RECORD

THE trip to Dawson took five days. Rayborne made the journey handcuffed and in total silence until the smoke from the chimneys of Dawson showed in the distance

just as dusk was settling over the valley.

"They'll be sayin' you done a good job, Mac," he said, as both men slogged along behind the sled. "You got yer man. They'll be hangin' me because someone lied. You won our last scrap, Mac. I guess that's the only one that counts—the last one. I s'pose you'll be there to look on."

"I'll never watch them hang you, Red. I couldn't do that."

"No guts, eh?" Rayborne said bitterly. "Funny, I never figured you was yellow. But you'd leave a man die among strangers, without a friend there at the last."

"Shut up, Red," MacLean growled. "You talk too much."

Inspector Blake rose abruptly from his chair and leaned forward across his desk as Constable MacLean opened the door and stepped aside for his red-headed, manacled prisoner to precede him into the office at detachment.

"MacLean! You back! And you brought in your man?"

"Yes, sir," the constable said quietly. "You look surprised."

"Why wouldn't I look surprised? Your dogs showed up at Fortymile a week ago. Corporal Jasper's out hunting for you!"

"I had a little bad luck. Stepped on a slippery rock an' got knocked out. When I came to, the dogs had ripped into my pack an' eaten all the grub, and stampeded. I had skipped my noon meal that day to gain on Red, and there wasn't any supper. I pushed on in the morning, but I was a little weak, I guess. I didn't overtake Red till sometime in the night. The next thing I knew I woke up in a prospector's cabin. I had passed out and Red left me at the cabin and went on down to Birch Creek and located an abandoned claim. I waited over a day to feed up, then I got another outfit from a trader and shoved on. I found Red in his cabin, and persuaded him to come on back with me."

The inspector's lips twitched slightly at the corners as he glanced from the bruise under Rayborne's left eye, to the deep cut in the corner of MacLean's right one.

"You were on the American side," he said. "Did you get a marshal to make the arrest?"

"No, sir. The prospector told me there was no marshal nearer than Eagle, so I arrested Rayborne myself. It wasn't much of a job."

"The devil it wasn't!" Rayborne growled. "If my foot hadn't slipped and—"

"That'll do!" the inspector cut in.

"You'll get a chance to talk, later." He paused and eyed the prisoner sharply. "You knew this officer was about to arrest you on a murder charge. Why didn't you leave him where he passed out—there where he overtook you that night?"

"Why—he'd 'ave froze to death!" Red said indignantly. "I couldn't leave him like that. We . . . we was kids together!"

The inspector cleared his throat and turned to MacLean. "Why was it necessary to fight this man to arrest him? You had your revolver. Why didn't you cover him?"

MacLean flushed and looked uncomfortable. "I wouldn't shoot him. That was the second time he saved my life."

"He saved mine once," growled Rayborne.

The inspector shrugged. "Take the handcuffs off him, and lock him in a cell," he directed.

AS MacLean unlocked the cuffs he grinned. "I think we'd better turn him loose," he said quietly. "Red didn't kill that watchman and I can prove it. That's why I went after him."

Both men stared at the constable, speechless. The inspector was the first to find his voice. "You can prove he didn't kill that watchman—so that's why you went after him! What do you mean by that?"

"I knew that Red would never give up without a scrap," MacLean explained. "And I knew that if anyone else went after him, he'd probably have to shoot him to bring him in. So it was up to me."

"But—you say you can prove he didn't kill that man!"

"Sure I can," MacLean insisted. "Those right-hand fingerprints on that pick handle—the weapon the murderer used—every one of the four fingers and the thumb, left dandy prints. You saw them yourself, and the photograph of them is right here in the office." He turned abruptly to the prisoner. "Show him your right hand, Red. You see," he said to his chief, "the middle finger's missin'. I was there when he got it smashed between the bumpers of a couple of freight cars."

"An' you knew all the time I never done it!" Rayborne exclaimed. "Why in tarnation didn't you tell me—instead of 'fightin' it out with me, there on Birch Crick?"

MacLean shook his head. "You wouldn't have believed me, Red. It's like you said, you knew someone had lied about seein' you runnin' from that strong room that night. You figured you didn't have a chance in the world to beat the rap. You'd have thought it was a cheap trick on my part to get you to come on back without any trouble. You wouldn't have believed about those fingerprints. And besides," he added, his grin widening, "it was a cinch I could lick you anyway, so—"

"Like hell it was! If I hadn't slipped there on the snow I'd have knocked the tar out of you!"

MacLean flushed. "If that's what you think, just step outside and I'll give you a chance to prove it!"

A slow grin overspread the redhead's face. "No, Mac. I guess we've fought enough. It's like I said, you won the last one. I'll admit you're the best man."

"The devil I am!" MacLean flared. "Remember the shellacking you gave me that time back of the water tank?"

"Yeah. But that wasn't a patch on what you done to me the time you knocked my tooth out! My jaw hurt fer a week after that."

"I wonder why we were always fighting, anyhow," MacLean mused.

"It seems like you were always laying for me."

"Don't you know?" asked Rayborne in astonishment.

The constable shook his head. "Never could figure it out."

"Why—because Marie Brown liked you better'n she did me."

"Marie Brown! Why, I hated the sight of that empty-headed little fool!"

"Yeah—an' she knew it. It made her sore, finally. She told me she'd go with me steady if I'd lick you good an' proper. So I was always tryin' it. Sometimes I'd lick you—but you'd lick me the next time an' I'd have to start all over again. I guess Marie never gave a snap of her fingers fer me, an' at last she wanted to get rid of me. It was her told it around that I robbed old man Jenkins' store. I know'd I couldn't prove I didn't so I skipped out. An' then, when I seen her, up here, I told her if she ever repeated that lie, I'd break her neck. I'll be doggoned if I'm goin' back an' serve time fer somethin' I never done!"

"You saw her up here!" exclaimed MacLean. "You mean she's here in Dawson?"

"No, she's on Baxter Crick. Married a fella name of Johnson. He's a dredge engineer fer the Eureka outfit. I was firin' fer him."

MAC LEAN'S lips pursed and he emitted a long, low whistle. "So that's the way of it, eh? Do you know who it was that told about seeing you running from the strong room that night?"

"No! I sure wish I did, though; I'd give him what he had comin'!"

"It isn't a 'him,'" MacLean said quietly. "It was Marie Johnson. wife of a dredge engineer for the Eureka outfit."

Red Rayborne's face flushed scarlet. "Why the—the lyin' little troublemaker! I'll . . . I'll—"

"No, you won't, Red. What goes on from here is up to us." MacLean turned to the inspector who had been an interested listener. "That woman was a passenger on the *Sarah*. But with the freeze-up comin' when it did, it's a cinch the *Sarah* never made Winton!"

The inspector nodded. "That's right. She's frozen in at Ogilvie. Some of her passengers came back here, and the rest are waiting to be escorted out by the police. I'm sending Peters and Brooks up river in the morning. We've had the devil of a time getting enough dogs together to take the twenty-odd passengers on to Skagway."

"Better hold them up long enough for me to run up to Baxter Creek," MacLean advised. "When I checked up on the Johnson woman I found she had some heavy baggage. I've got a hunch that if I arrest Johnson, we'll find that his fingerprints match those on that pick handle! And if they do, I'll slip on up to Ogilvie with Peters an' Brooks an' bring Mrs. Marie Brown Johnson back with me—and the ten hundred and forty ounces of dust from the Eureka's strong room with her! I'll get a lot of satisfaction out of that—after what she's done to Red!"

"Hm-m-m," murmured Inspector Blake, pinching his lower lip between thumb and forefinger, "your hunch may be dead right. Good luck to you, lad! And," he added, a grin twitching the corners of his lips as his twinkling eyes shifted from one to the other of the two men before him, "maybe I was wrong when I told you that sentiment has no place in police work."

THE END.

BOOTHILL TURN OFF

BY GEORGE MICHENER

Tod Creegan stood beside Kris Ralt in the early-morning sun and looked toward the Palisades, a country of rearing shale and trap desolation already acrawl with the fierce desert heat.

"I'd ruther not use the kid," he muttered. "I don't like it! But if we went in there alone and missed the waterhole—"

"Afraid the kid'll double-cross us?" asked Ralt. "He won't. I've been givin' him an earful. He's all set to be another Billy the Kid." A thin smile peaked Billy Ralt's sly features. "Be smart, fella," he said. "We got to use the kid. He knows the Palisades, and we don't. Be smart."

Ralt was a bit too smart for Tod Creegan's fancy. Ralt held his body slightly askew from the bandaging about his waist. Somehow the posture seemed to befit the man. Creegan didn't trust Ralt.

The two of them were partners—a recent partnership formed for the purpose of robbing the Kintock stage. The stage had been robbed, and Creegan and Ralt had divided two thousand dollars between them. Also, as a memento of the occasion, the stage guard had scoured Ralt's ribs with a load of buckshot.

Ralt's wound had forced the two men to hole up. For three days they had been the unwelcome guests of a nester family on the rim of the badlands. Now Ralt was strong enough to travel again. He and Creegan waited a short distance from the shack while the nester kid, Benny Nesbit, caught and saddled their horses.

This was unfamiliar country to Creegan and Ralt. The law was closing in behind them, and the Palisades seemed the surest direction of escape. Somewhere within that furnace fastness lay a waterhole. Willingly, almost pleadingly, young Benny Nesbit had offered to guide them to it.

Creegan would have preferred to take a chance on finding water without the boy's help. A big stubble-jowled man, Tod Creegan, with a gift for action and none at all for introspection, he would have been hard put to explain why he didn't want to use the kid. Nevertheless, the fact remained—he didn't like it!

He watched moodily as Benny came up the trail from the tiny canyon pasture. The kid was riding his own sorry range pony and leading the outlaws' saddled mounts.

Martin Nesbit, Benny's father, had not been informed of his son's projected departure with the two bandits. Martin, Creegan guessed, was going to like the idea even less than he himself did.

Martin Nesbit hated Creegan and Ralt, silently and thoroughly. The nester and his wife had been prisoners in their own home for three days. They had suffered the indignity of waking, eating and sleeping under the constantly alert eyes of the two outlaws. Bitterest of all, Martin Nesbit had had to keep still while Kris Ralt entertained his son with accounts of glamorous and stirring incidents in the life of a road agent.

These tales of gun fights and high, reckless courage and blood-tingling

night rides had caused Benny's mother to tremble fearfully. That had amused Ralt.

Benny himself had listened avidly, enthralled as only a youngster with a head full of dreams can be enthralled by deeds of wild daring. This, also, had amused Ralt. It had put him in a good frame of mind, which, no doubt, had contributed to this quick recovery from his wound.

BENNY NESBIT, bringing the horses, had circled to avoid passing too close to the nester shack. He halted before Creegan and Ralt, and dismounted. Glancing toward the shack, he asked with elaborate carelessness: "The old man show himself yet?"

Ralt grinned. "Afraid he'll try to stop you?"

The boy snapped up his head. "He'd have a time tryin'—"

"No," Creegan interrupted heavily. "Your old man ain't showed himself, nor your mother. I guess they're still in bed."

Martin Nesbit and his wife stayed in bed sullenly every morning until routed out by Creegan or Ralt. This morning Benny had been up at

"You ain't gettin' the chance to put the law on our trail," Creegan snapped—and fired point-blank at Benny.

dawn to rustle breakfast for the two outlaws, and Martin and his wife had been allowed to keep up their pretense of sleep. Now Creegan hoped—and it was plain Benny did, too—that they would remain in bed until the three had departed.

Benny Nesbit was sixteen, and taut under the burden of a recently acquired maturity. Sunlight glinted finely across his upper lip and sharpened the creases at the corners of his sternly compressed mouth. His eyes, narrowed on Creegan and Ralt, looked, for all their semblance of hardness, like a worshipful puppy's.

Ralt's gaze was suddenly fierce. "Listen, kid, we don't want no nonsense! You're *sure* you can put us in Lemon Canyon?"

"I told you I was sure. Do you think I'd lie to you, Kris?" There was no questioning the boy's sincerity. His voice picked up a beat in eagerness. "Say the word, Kris, and I'll do better than put you in Lemon Canyon. I'll go with you clear to the waterhole, or farther!"

Ralt relaxed. "We'll see," he half promised. "We can talk about that later, eh, Tod?"

Creegan grunted noncommittally.

Ralt aroused an animal wariness in Creegan. The nester kid, so willing to be of service, moved him in a deeper and more emotional way. He gazed at the boy, pondering the urge for salutary violence. At the moment it would have pleased him to give Benny Nesbit a good whaling.

Smiling, Ralt sidled toward the horses with a feline outdrawing of his lank figure. "You'll do, kid," he stated softly. "You'll do to ride river with. How about it, Tod?"

Creegan grunted again. His attention went to the door of the nester shack beyond. Mrs. Nesbit had appeared there.

Modesty and the presence of the two outlaws in the shack had prevented Benny's mother from changing her clothes. For the past three nights she had gone stoically to bed without removing even so much as her shoes. She stood in the doorway uncertainly smoothing her crumpled gray dress, a gaunt angular woman pithed by the sterile desiccation of this land. As she studied the three by the saddled horses, her hands became stationary.

"Benny," she called timidly.

The boy's head was averted, and he cupped his hand to aid the wounded Ralt to mount. Only the faint color in his cheeks showed that he had heard his mother.

MARTIN NESBIT, bare-footed and clothed in a pair of faded jeans, came to the doorway behind his wife. Instantly fury was stark on the nester's seamed face, and he cried out: "Ben! What're you doin'? You come here!"

Ralt, atop his horse, answered harshly: "We're takin' him with us. What about it?"

Ellen Nesbit uttered a wailing protest. "No! Not my boy! Benny! Benny!" She gripped the door jamb and contorted her lips in a trembling smile. "You're joking," she said. "How you frightened me, Mr. Ralt. But I'm not frightened now. See how calm I am. That's because I know you're joking. I know you gentlemen wouldn't take my—"

"Ellen!" said Martin Nesbit. "Be quiet!" He left the doorway and strode toward his son. "Ben!" he said.

Benny Nesbit was silent. He cringed before his father's advance.

Ralt spoke in a tone of soft deadliness. "Get back, old man. Back to your kennel."

Nesbit fastened his gaze on the

outlaw and came on steadily, his bare feet padding.

Ralt put a hand on his gun butt and waited. His face was fixed in a lazy grin.

Moving swiftly, Creegan planted his bulk before the nester. "Go back!" he ordered.

Martin Nesbit halted and looked at Creegan with gleaming eyes. Like a scrawny prophet of vengeance, he raised a lean arm, pointing. "Damn you!" he said in a deep and terrible voice. "Thieves and murderers! May—"

"Martin!" cried his wife.

The gleam in Nesbit's eyes died and slowly he lowered his arm. He gazed at his son wordlessly for a moment, then abruptly wheeled and returned to his wife. Behind him, Creegan heard Ralt's amused chuckle."

"Well, fork your hull, kid, and we'll drag." Ralt said.

Ellen Nesbit was watching Creegan, her eyes mutely pleading. Creegan shuffled his feet. "We'll send him back," he muttered. "We ain't goin' to hurt him."

Ralt and Benny Nesbit were already on their way when Creegan swung into the saddle. He followed a good hundred yards in the rear, making no effort to close the gap. And that was how they rode away, Ralt and Benny Nesbit and then big Tod Creegan.

Once Creegan looked back, and Martin Nesbit and his wife were still in the doorway, holding together to the last outspinning of the thread of sight. And so they remained, motionless figures of despair, alone in a shack that steadily contracted and at last was lost in the distance—

Benny Nesbit was downcast, a little conscience-stricken, perhaps. Creegan could tell that by the way the kid sat the saddle. Ralt was trying to raise Benny's spirits. Ralt was a persuasive talker when he had a mind to be.

Finally, cynically curious, Creegan drew up alongside the two.

"—fifteen years ago that was," Ralt was telling Benny. "If I had listened to my old man, where'd I be now? A forty-dollar cowpuncher, maybe! Or a hoeman with my pants out and a litter o' dirty-faced brats hollerin' for somethin' in their bellies. A fine life that'd be for a man. A *man* I say!"

Ralt became paternal, confidential. "I'm older'n you, kid, and I've seen plenty," he said. "A man can crawl on his belly or he can stand up on his two legs. That's somethin' you got to decide for yourself. There's a time in every man's life when, if he turns one way—" Ralt's voice droned on unctuously, his words buttered on both sides.

Creegan lost interest. He scowled and scratched himself. He felt like batting Ralt's ears down. And he felt like giving Benny Nesbit a boot in the pants. He didn't know why, but that was the way he felt.

THE Palisades loomed closer, and Tod Creegan had seen a change come upon Benny Nesbit. No longer were the boy's lips tight, but were parted in a smile of excited anticipation. His head was canted to the hark of the traveling hoofs, and his young eyes were wide with beholding the vision of the years ahead. And of a sudden he lifted his voice rebelliously: "Did they expect me to stay here all my life? A sand hole like this! I got a right to live my own life!"

"Now you're talkin', kid!" Ralt said. "Live high and damn all sheriffs. Let the—"

"Yes," Creegan cut in savagely. "Live high for a day and run the

rest of the time! Feel your guts turn when you see a law badge. Money don't stick and women don't neither —especially women! Lead is what sticks. You can ask Kris about that. Ask him if his side hurts."

Ralt stared. "Now what's got crosswise in *your* craw? You talkin' about women! What woman *would* stick with a face like yours?"

"That's my business," retorted Creegan. "You talk too much, Kris. You make my head roar." He rubbed his whiskers with an explanatory hand, saw Benny eying him, and scowled. "My face didn't have nothin' to do with it," he mumbled defensively.

Benny lifted his brows in polite query. "What did you say, Tod?"

"Nothin'," growled Creegan. "Skip it." He dropped a pace behind the others and sulkily jerked down his hat brim.

"To blazes with him!" said Ralt.

Ralt didn't talk so much after that. His side was beginning to bother him. By the time they reached the Palisades he was riding as carefully as if he had a pocketful of eggs.

Here, in the badlands, they traversed gully bottoms where the heat sang and rippled against the trap rock, and the sun was a burden that bowed their backs. Sweat made white salt streaks on their shirts and their eyes became bloodshot and their tongues stuck fast in their mouths. They traversed a dozen gullies, and the last they entered seemed no different from the first, yet Benny Nesbit halted and motioned.

"Here it is," he said thickly. "Lemon Canyon."

Kris Ralt kept on stolidly, glancing neither to right nor left, his face set in a grimace of pain.

Creegan swung his horse in front of Benny Nesbit, blocking the boy's progress. "You're sure this is Lemon Canyon?" he insisted. "There's no mistake?"

"I'm sure," Benny said.

"And all we have to do is follow the canyon?"

"That's all. The waterhole is right at the head of it. A blind man couldn't miss it now. We'll reach it by dark."

Creegan looked and saw that Ralt was beyond earshot. He bent toward the boy. "Go back!" he said urgently.

"No! I'm comin' with you and Kris. I'm never goin' back!" Benny Nesbit had expected this, and his mouth was drawn and stubbornly earnest.

"Look," he said. "Don't you trust me, Tod? Look here! I've had this all the time. Any time I wanted I could have plugged you and Kris and got the reward money." Dramatically, the boy took a stingy gun from beneath his shirt.

Creegan and Ralt had thought they had disposed of all weapons in the nester shack. They had even thrown out a pair of scissors and a butcher knife. But the kid had been smart. He had had them cold-turkey the whole time, and neither Creegan nor Ralt had known it.

For a startled moment Creegan squinted at the vicious, stub-bareled little gun. Then he said scornfully: "A tinhorn's popgun! It wouldn't hit a barn door at fifty feet. Where'd you get it? Did your old man know you had it?"

Benny shook his head. "I kept it hid under a rock down by the corral."

"No wonder you kept it hid. A gun like that for a *man* to be carryin'! Let's have a look at it, kid." Creegan held out his hand.

Reluctantly, somewhat shame-

facedly, Benny gave him the gun.

Creegan weighed the weapon in his palm for a moment. Then, suddenly, he hurled the gun clattering against the gully side, where it disappeared among the rocks.

"A lesson for you, kid!" he snarled. "Don't never trust a crook! D'you think I trust Kris? Or him me? We're both packin' too much money from the stage holdup to trust anybody. One of us, Kris or me, is stayin' here permanent, and winner take all. And you ain't gettin' the chance to put the law on the trail o' the lucky one!"

As he finished speaking, Creegan whipped out his own gun, steadied it, and fired point-blank. He had one clear picture of the boy with his punctured hat tilting, and his young face shocked and unbelieving. Then Benny whirled his horse and fled.

KRIS RALT had halted at the sound of the gunshot, and he was watching from a distance. He waited until Creegan rode up, then spoke in an ominous tone:

"What happened, fella? What kind of a game are you tryin' now?"

"No game," Creegan answered shortly. "This is Lemon Canyon. We got no more use for the kid, so I got rid of him."

"Did *I* say we had no more use for him?"

Creegan gazed at him without speaking, and Ralt's eyes became veiled slits. "All right," Ralt murmured. "So we got rid of the kid. Did you have to turn him against us? Now he'll have the sheriff on our trail."

"The sheriff's already on our trail. Old Martin Nesbit will see to that. So what's the difference? The law's behind us. Once we cross the Palisades we can find plenty of hideouts."

Ralt was unsatisfied and distrustful. "I'm not so worried about the law," he said slowly. "There's somethin' else goin' on here. I'm a bad man to fool with, my friend."

"Are you?" Creegan shrugged unconcernedly. "Well, I'm tol'able mean myself. I got a mean nature. I like to scare kids. To the devil with you and the kid both! Are we movin' on or do we stay here jawin' till the law catches up with us?"

The two followed Lemon Canyon deeper into the Palisades. The heat, the motion of the horse and the throb of his wound shortened Ralt's temper. Creegan could sense the brewing poison in the man. Ralt was like a coiled rattler. Continually he turned suspicious eyes upon his big companion.

The sun was lowering when suddenly a shrill voice cried: "Lift your hands, Tod! Not you, Kris. Get Tod's gun! Quick!"

Creegan stopped, his hands lifting, and his gaze went sharp and astonished to the ledge ahead of them where Benny Nesbit stood with leveled gun—the same short-barreled gun Creegan had tossed among the rocks.

The boy's hand was shaking with excitement. His voice rose in shrillness: "Get his gun, Kris! He was goin' to kill you for the money you're carryin'. He told me!"

Creegan glanced sidewise at Ralt.

Ralt's sly mouth was twisting. "So-o," he murmured. "So that was the game. First get rid of the kid, then get rid of me."

At once Creegan forgot Benny Nesbit and his stingy gun. Death was here, very close, the warning of it in Ralt's chilled stare, in his tensing shoulders.

Creegan snatched at his gun and shot, as did Ralt, and the two reports crashed together. Ralt's bullet

was a cruel stake in Creegan's side, driving him from the saddle.

Benny Nesbit cried out and his gun banged harmlessly.

Afterward, remotely, Creegan heard the thump of his own body upon the ground. He lay without pain, looking up blankly into the sky.

Benny Nesbit bent over him, his shadow falling across Creegan's unwinking eyes. "You killed him," said the boy in a stunned, mechanical voice. "He's dead."

Creegan closed his eyes. "You were too sharp for us, kid," he spoke slowly, carefully. "You outfoxed us. There ain't a lawman in the country could've done it slicker. When we made you come with us—" He paused, summoning his strength to force this thought upon young Benny Nesbit. "When Kris and me *made* you come with us—" he repeated. Then weakness engulfed him and he drifted down into oblivion—

WHEN Creegan opened his eyes, the sun was gone, and men were gathered in the dusk about him. Voices beat upon his ears.

"But why," someone was questioning, "did he try to plug you, kid? What was the use? He knew I'd be on his trail as soon as your dad could get me word they'd stopped at your place."

Creegan's lips worked laboriously. "Not shoot him," he managed. "Just scare him."

"Ah, so you've been listening!" The speaker came closer, a big, raw-boned man with a sheriff's badge on his vest. "You wanted to scare him," he said harshly. "First you made him go with you, and then you wanted to scare him. But the kid didn't scare, did he? He had the nerve to ride back for his gun and circle to head you off. And then he tricked you two killers into plugging each other! A natural-born badge toter—an' *that's* the kid you thought you could scare!"

Creegan focused his gaze upon the sheriff and upon the boy beside him. Benny Nesbit was standing very erect. His arms were folded and his face was as stern and uncompromising as any lawman's could have been.

There's a time in every man's life when, if he turns one way— Kris Ralt had said that. Well, Creegan and Ralt had made their turning long ago. And now, Creegan guessed, young Benny Nesbit had made his.

Creegan's gaze blurred, and with quiet satisfaction he said: "No, the kid didn't scare. But—it's worked out all right, just the . . . same."

"Yes," agreed the sheriff, "it's worked out very well. You killed Ralt, and Ralt— Well, is there any message? Anyone—"

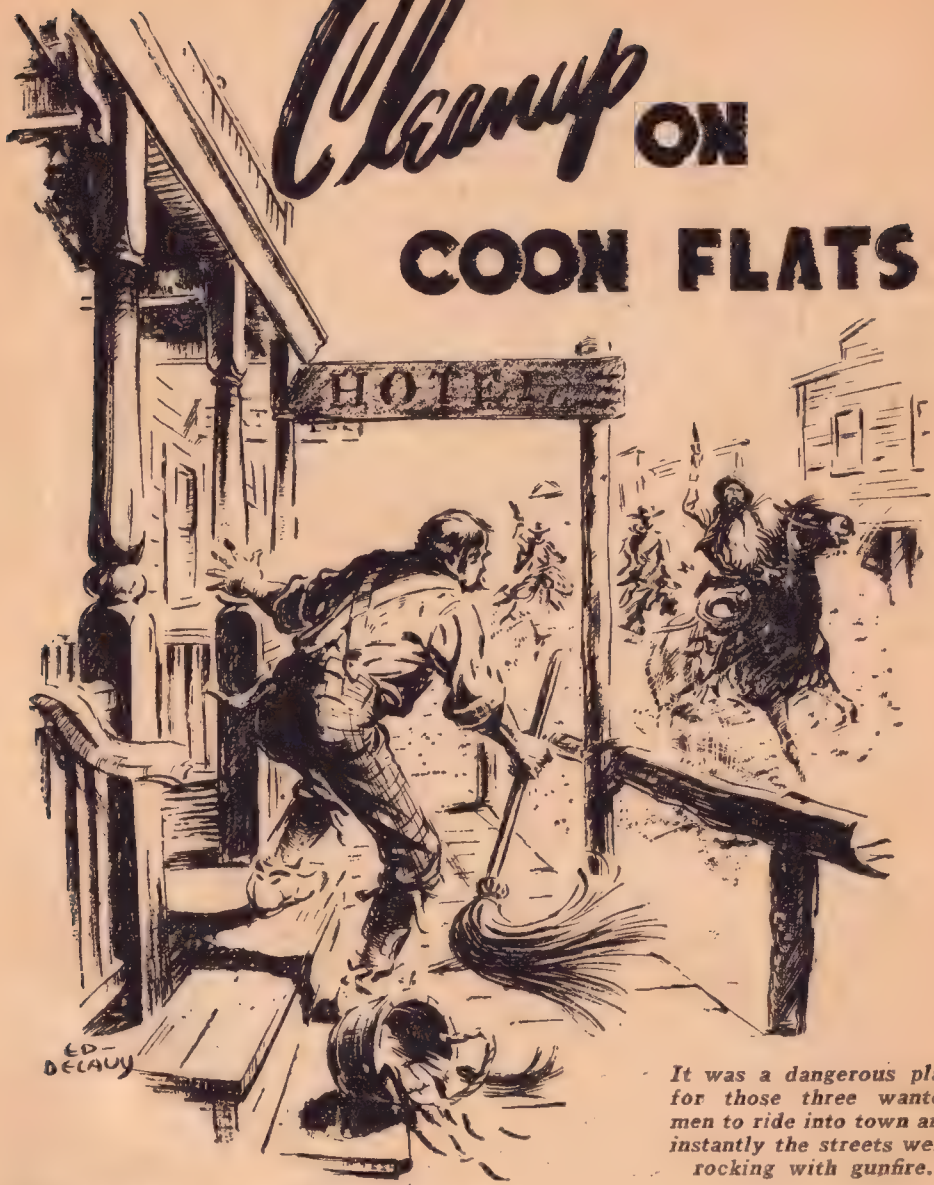
"No," murmured Creegan wearily. "No one. No one but my . . . wife and . . . and she left me . . . ten years ago." His mouth twitched in the ghost of a smile. "She . . . was afraid," he added in a whisper, "that I'd be a . . . a bad influence . . . for kids. I wish . . . I—" He sighed and his eyes rolled upward.

"Gone," pronounced the sheriff. "A bad un. No wonder his wife left him. "He put his hand on young Benny Nesbit's shoulder. "You did a good job, kid. Get a couple more years on you, and I'll give you a deputy's badge. Your dad'll be proud of you."

Benny Nesbit nodded silently. His eyes, when he looked at the sheriff, were as pleased and worshipful as a puppy's.

THE END.

Cleanup ON COON FLATS



It was a dangerous play for those three wanted men to ride into town and instantly the streets were rocking with gunfire.

BY HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

CHAPTER I

BADGE-TOTING RUSTLERS

FROM their high perch on the flank of Disaster Mountain the two men could look down on a wide sweep of pleasant Nevada country. Immediately below them Piute Meadows lay untroubled in the late afternoon sunshine, rolling away in unfenced freedom to the far shore of the Calico foothills. Hidden be-

yond those hills lay the little town of Wild Horse. Colt Williams' thoughts were there, and he couldn't pull them away. The flicker of emotion that touched his strong young face was plain reading to old Owyhee Johnson, companion of the dim trails Colt had ridden for the past two years.

"I know what you're thinkin'," Owyhee grumbled. "But don't try it. It'll only git you into trouble. There's no ridin' into Wild Horse and squarin' yore account with Ike Button as long as he's the sheriff. You got to wait."

"I wasn't thinking only of Button," Colt replied. "I was wondering about dad—how he's getting along. He won't be around much longer. I'd like to see him before it's too late—"

Owyhee nodded. "I know how that goes, but you'll have to be satisfied with jest hearin' from him this time. Young Lin Maynard ought to be showin' up with a letter before sundown. We'll start driftin' then. It ain't safe here. If you—" He stopped abruptly. "There's someone over there on that point of rocks signalin' this way now. See that rag wavin'?"

"It's Lin all right!" Colt exclaimed. "I see his horse back there in the scrub. It'll take me some time to get across to him. You answer his signal and I'll—" In the act of getting to his feet, he froze to attention.

"What is it?" Owyhee demanded, with instant suspicion of trouble.

"The kid just flung himself flat on the ground—as though he'd spotted someone watching him," Colt exclaimed. "He saw something."

"I'll say he did!" Owyhee jerked out the next second. "Look!" He pointed to the upper end of the meadows. Three men had ridden out of the tangle of aspens and stunted cedars.

"Pretty late in the day for Stack's punchers to be drifting in here," Colt said tensely. Jeb Stack's big Hook and Ladder spread owned every acre of this summer range.

"You better be sure they are Hook and Ladder men," Owyhee returned. "Someone may know that boy is driftin' through these hills lookin' for you."

Colt had snatched up a pair of glasses. Training them on the three men, he gave a grunt of startled surprise.

"They're Button's deputies—all three of 'em!" he announced. "The one in the lead is Frosty Winters, the sidewinder that framed me on that rustling charge!"

"Waal, we can't pull out now and leave that kid over there to face 'em," Owyhee said harshly. "You wanted a showdown with these gents, and you'll never have a better chance. Better git yore rifle—"

"Wait," advised Colt. "We're safe enough here for the present, and so is Lin if he stays where he is. Let's see what these gents are going to do."

THE three riders came on, rifles across their saddlebows. Repeatedly they turned to scan their back trail, obviously anxious to make sure that they were not being followed. Every outcropping and clump of brush engaged their wary attention before they passed it. As usual at this time of day, little bunches of cows were gathered about the springs that dotted these high meadows. The three men were soon among them.

Hook and Ladder's work was behind schedule this year; some of the late calves had not been branded, though all were weaned. The little

fellows shied away from these strangers and old steers began to move off, for this stuff was all wild range stock.

Frosty Winters and his companion knew their business, however, and a moment later there was no doubt of what it was. Rifles were shoved into saddleboots and their hands went to their ropes.

"So that's what they're here for," Colt whipped out. "They're not looking for us!"

"I'll say they ain't!" Owyhee rasped. "Rustlers—and every one of the skunks wearin' a law badge!"

"Some folks—Jeb Stack for one—would have to see this to believe it!" A white-lipped fury gripped Colt as he watched the three men quickly cut out a score of yearlings and start them across the meadows.

"I didn't have to see it to believe it," Owyhee flung back. "I've been wise to Ike Button's game for a long time. You wasn't the first man that got tossed into jail because he knew too much about the sheriff's real business. I know I'm an old lobo, and the law's got some honest grudges agin' me, but I tell you it makes my blood boil to see what them badge toters is gittin' away with. It ain't too late to stop 'em. At four hundred yards, I couldn't miss."

"No," Colt insisted. "I'm going to make this mean more to me than just knocking off these birds. I think I see how to trip Button and his whole bunch now, and I'm going to do it or die trying!"

"You may have to change yore plans in a hurry!" Owyhee declared. "Look at that!"

The three men had reached the far side of the meadows and were fanning the steers up the slope. Suddenly they changed their course straight for the point of rocks on which Lin Maynard lay hidden. Lin was alive to what was happening, for Colt saw him move toward his bronc. Button's deputies saw him too. Immediately they lost all interest in the yearlings they had cut out. They knew very well that their game was up if they failed to stop the boy. The sharp, flat crack of Frosty Winters' Remington tore across the stillness of the afternoon. The next moment the rifles of the other two were also barking with vicious menace.

Lin was riding recklessly, flattened out over his pony. Breathless, Colt watched. His lungs were almost bursting by the time the youngster reached the shelter of the scrub timber. Then an unconscious sigh of relief whooshed out of him. Lin was keeping the trees between him and his pursuers.

"He'll make it!" Colt told himself. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Owyhee raise his rifle. With catlike swiftness he flung out his hand and knocked the gun down.

"You're not making any fool play like that now!" he cried. "Put that gun down!"

OWYHEE stared at him, amazed and speechless. But only for a moment.

"Why, dang yore hide!" he exploded furiously. "That kid is in a jam on yore account! You mean to say yo're goin' to let them gents throw lead at him and do nuthin' about it? If that's yore idea, it ain't mine! Take yore hands off that rifle!" He gave the gun a jerk and almost wrenched it free. Struggling for possession of it, he saw Colt pull out his six-gun, grim determination riding him.

"Let go, or I'll bend this barrel over your head!" Colt threatened. "I'm having my way about this! Lin has given them the slip. A shot now would only tip my hand to Button's crowd."

Owyhee took a look and saw that Lin had indeed made good his escape. The three men who had been banging away at him were drawn up across the meadow. After a brief consultation, they disappeared in the trees. Reluctantly, Owyhee relaxed his grip on his rifle. His wrath had not subsided, however.

"The kid made it, sure enough, but it ain't yore fault that he ain't layin' over there with a slug in him," he said bitterly. "The Maynards always was yore friends—Cape especially. I wonder what he would have had to say if his brother had been shot down here for want of us helpin' him."

"He's going to get help from me—plenty of it!" Colt declared. "And he's sure going to need it. Winters knows Lin will head for Cape's place. He'll try to cut him off. Lin is due to get what I got—or worse—unless we get to him in time. You catch up our horses; we're pulling away from here on the double quick."

Owyhee shook his head. "I don't git you at all," he declared. "One minnit you won't do nuthin' and the next yo're ready to put yore head in the lion's mouth. You know what it'll mean if yo're caught on the flatlands around Wild Horse, don't you?"

"Sure, I know. But I'll stand some catching, and I promise you I'll hand my respects to Button and a few others before they burn me down. Get going now! It'll be night before we're half-way out of these hills."

CHAPTER II

FRAME-UP!

IT was after midnight when Colt and Owyhee reached Dead Creek. The moon was bright. Keeping to the shadows of the willow brakes, they started down the creek bottom. In a few minutes they caught their first glimpse of Cape Maynard's place. Not a light showed.

"Looks like it's safe to ride in," Owyhee observed.

"We'd better make awful sure before we do," Colt told him. "We'll stick to the willows until we're opposite the house."

They had proceeded only a short distance when they pulled up sharply.

"Men comin'—and they're in a hurry," Owyhee warned.

Colt listened a moment and then gave the word to pull back deeper into the blackness of the brakes. They did not have to wait long. Three minutes at most and two riders appeared. They had their ropes on a pair of steers, and they were hazing the animals along on the run. A moment or two and they had passed. Colt and Owyhee exchanged a long glance.

"One of those gents was Frosty Winters," Colt declared.

"What do you make of it—their bein' down here with a couple steers?"

"Only one answer to it," Colt said, his voice harsh and tense. "You can bet your life that Winters didn't lose any time getting word back to Button about what happened up in the meadows. He's doing something about it in a hurry."

"Waal?" Owyhee growled. "You mind sayin' what?"

"That they're keeping Lin away from the ranch until they can stack the deck on him," was the prompt

answer. "Take it from me, those two steers are Hook and Ladder stuff. They're going to be planted in Cape's corral. Come daylight, Ike Button is going to have young Lin in jail on a shut-and-closed rustling charge. Come on now; we're tagging along after that pair."

They were in time to see the two men turn the steers into Maynard's corral and then circle wide around the house and make for the road that led out from Wild Horse. Colt and Owyhee were at the corral five minutes later. They had left their horses in the willows.

"Jest as you said," Owyhee observed after a brief examination of the two steers. "Hook and Ladder written all over 'em. Reckon Button's holdin' a big bunch of 'em somewheres that ain't been overbranded yet."

"No doubt he's holding some stuff," Colt agreed, "but I'm not sure he's even bothering to doctor the brands. We saw them pass up unmarked weaners for branded yearlings this afternoon. When a rustler does that, he ain't figuring on staying with the critters very long. If I'm right that far, then Button's got a natural corral in the Calico hills mighty close to the Oregon line, so he can shove the stuff out of the State in a hurry and sell it up there and no questions asked."

"That makes sense to me," Owyhee muttered, "but it ain't fixin' this up. We better git Cape out here right off."

"And give ourselves away to whoever may be watching the house?" Colt demanded. "I should say not. We're going to get down into that irrigation ditch and make our way around in front. If we're lucky, we can get within a few feet of the door without anyone being the wiser."

Owyhee flicked a glance at him. "What do you mean—lucky?" he asked.

"We may find company in the ditch. Come on now—and be careful."

"All right," Owyhee muttered. "But you may be all wrong about the kid. He may be in bed this minnit."

Colt shook his head. "I made sure of that when I passed the horse corral. Half a dozen broncs there, and not a hot one in the bunch. Lin ain't home yet."

THE old ditch, high in weeds, wound around the house. On hands and knees the two men crawled forward. Once a scurrying jackrabbit brought them up short. Alert, wary, they went on, determined that if Button had his bushwhackers hidden in the ditch not to stumble over them without warning.

They reached the front of the house and explored the old ditch for some yards beyond before they were convinced that it held no lurking foe.

"We'll just wait here a few minutes," Colt told his companion. "If nothing happens, we'll rouse Cape."

The minutes dragged by. Owyhee was about to protest against waiting longer when Colt clapped a warning hand on his arm. Faint across the stillness of the night came the fast drumming of a hard-ridden horse. The sound grew and became unmistakable The hard-packed earth began to vibrate as though it were a drum under that sharp tattoo of flying hoofs, and it struck a note that was urgent and ominous.

Someone in the house struck a light. A second later the door opened and Cape Maynard stepped out, his wide shoulders tense with anxiety.

"We ought to call to him," Owyhee whispered.

Colt shook his head. "We'll have plenty to say about whatever happens here. Just keep your gun ready."

The horseman dashed into the yard a few moments later and flung himself from his saddle. It was young Lin Maynard.

"Lin, what's happened?" Cape demanded. "What's wrong?"

The boy began to pour out his story. A sharp warning cry from his brother stopped him before he had finished. Three men were riding into the yard.

"This will be Button," Cape said quickly. "You don't have to be afraid of these skunks. Just let me do the talking."

Colt nudged Owyhee. "Keep these gents covered," he whispered. "You're a dead shot. If they try to cut down on the Maynards, you stop 'em. I'm going to sneak up to the house."

He started off at once. When he could do it without being seen, he crawled out of the ditch and reached the rear of the building. Hop vines grew along the side of the house. Keeping close to them, Colt reached the front just as the sheriff was stepping to the ground. Ike Button had Frosty Winters and another deputy with him.

"What's the meaning of this?" Cape demanded.

"I reckon you know what it means," Button flung back contemptuously. "I got a warrant for that kids arrest. He's got a little careless about that wide loop he's been throwin'."

"Why, you contemptible cur!" Cape burst out. "It didn't take you long to frame up that story, did it? You know it's a lie from first to last. Lin happened to catch your men red-handed. This is your answer!"

"He won't get away with it, Cape!" Lin flared. "He won't frame me the way he did Colt Williams!" Foolishly, he turned to his horse. It was the very move Button wanted him to make.

"Frosty!" the sheriff barked. "Stop him!"

Winters' gun flicked up, his intention plain reading. There was to be no warning. This was to be cold-blooded murder. But Owyhee was not caught napping. His gun flamed redly from the ditch. Frosty Winters howled with pain as the blood spurted from his shattered wrist and his gun went flying.

THE rest of you freeze where you are!" Colt Williams whipped out, his long, tall shape detaching itself from the shadows. "If I shoot, it won't be to smash a wrist."

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Button let out a gasp of surprise as he recognized Colt Williams. The others were no less astonished.

"I might have known I'd find you here," the sheriff rasped. He glowered at Cape Maynard. "This ain't goin' to help you none, Maynard—harborin' a wanted man. I reckon all three of yuh know there's Hook and Ladder steers in yore corral this minute."

"That's a lie, Button!" Cape cried.

"No, it isn't, Cape," Colt told him. "Theres two of Stacks yearlings down there. I saw Winters and this other gent put them there less than an hour ago."

"What jury will believe that, comin' from you?" Button sneered.

"They'll believe it when I get around to telling them," Colt retorted. He turned to Cape. "I saw what happened in the meadows this afternoon. It was just as Lin told you. Button knows the jig is up if this gets out. You know he doesn't intend to let it get out."

"Colt, you shouldn't have come here," Cape said.

"Lin would be dead this minute if I hadn't," Colt pointed out. "I know my being here puts a bad slant on things for you, but there's more important things to think of now. I'm not letting Button take Lin to town. The kid's going with me."

"No," Cape said flatly. "You made a bad mistake in busting out of jail, Colt. If you'd stood trial, you wouldn't be where you are today."

"No, I'd be dead! They'll kill Lin, too—frame a break on him." Colt turned to the boy. "Lin, you're old enough to know what you want to do. What's your answer?"

"I'll go with you," was the prompt response.

Cape made still another attempt to stop his brother. "Lin, you don't know what you're doing," he insisted. "You may get away, but what will you have ahead of you? You ought to know you can't beat the law, rotten as it is, by running away. Make this play and even your friends will wonder if you weren't guilty." He turned to Colt. "As for you," he said, his tone bitter and accusing, "I don't mind your double-crossing me, but what sort of skunk have you turned out to be—dragging that kid into outlawry?"

The injustice of the charge whipped hot through Colt, but he held his temper. "You're wrong," he said. "If I thought this meant outlawry for Lin, I'd stop him before he could move an inch. I'm going to get justice for him and for myself, and it isn't going to take long."

Button started to threaten him, but Colt cut him off.

"You save your breath," he advised. "You'll need it, Button. Before I'm through this time I'll have you locked up in your own jail, and your rat-eyed deputies along with you. Take their guns, Lin, and toss 'em into the ditch. Then get on your horse and start toward the creek; we'll pick you up there."

It didn't take long. Lin was soon riding away. Colt began to back off toward the irrigation ditch, his eyes on the sheriff.

"Button, you and Winters and this other wolf stay right where you are," he said thinly. "I can be persuaded to end this business right here if you try any nonsense."

The sheriff's eyes were murderous; but they were cautious too, and he consoled himself with the thought that he personally would see to it that on his next meeting with Colt Williams the scales would be as sharply tipped in his favor as they were now tipped against him.

In a few minutes the night swallowed Colt. Owyhee joined him and they made their way to the creek where Lin was waiting for them. Then they were mounted and streaking away. Their course took them north. Before dawn they were in the hills. At the swift-flowing North Fork they broke their trail effectually.

"We don't want to be lingerin' here long," Owyhee declared as they pulled up to breathe their horses. "In a few hours these hills will be crawlin' with Button's men."

"We're not going much farther," Colt told him. "I know this country better than most men. I figure I know a spot where we can hole up for a day or two. We'll swing away from the creek now and cut back to it in the course of a mile."

Lin spoke up; he knew this country, too. "That will throw us into the canyon," he warned. "Pretty hard to put a horse through there."

Colt nodded. "I know," he murmured. "It can be done. I found a cave in there several years ago. Runs back under the wall for sixty-seventy feet. If Button locates us there, he's smarter than I think he is."

DAYLIGHT found them moving up the almost impassable canyon of the North Fork. Colt purposely let Owyhee and Lin pass the cave before he stopped them.

"I just wanted to prove to myself that you could be right on top of it without seeing it," he explained. He turned against the seemingly unbroken canyon wall, led his horse across the fallen rubble and, parting a clump of mahogany brush, showed them the mouth of the cavern.

They took their horses in with them and at Colt's direction partly walled up the entrance with loose rock. Lin worked in puzzled silence. These preparations plainly raised a question in his mind. Unconsciously, Owyhee put it into words a moment later.

"Looks as though you was figgerin' to stand off a siege here," he observed caustically. "Common sense ought to tell you that the sooner we shake the dust of Nevada off our boots, the better off we'll be."

"That's what I'm thinking," Lin spoke up. "I want to get out of this country."

Colt shook his head and placed another rock in position before he straightened up to face them. "We don't seem to see this thing eye to eye at all," he said. "Pulling out of this country is exactly what I don't intend to do. I meant what I said when I told Cape that I intended to get justice for you and me, Lin. The only way that can be done is by smashing Button and his gang. I'm responsible for you now, and I don't propose to see you end up living outside the law."

"You could slip up into Oregon for a week or two till things quiet down and then come back, couldn't you?" Owyhee argued.

"That's just what Button is sure we'll do," was Colt's answer. "There's only three or four ways north out of these hills. He'll have every one of 'em blocked off by noon —and his orders will be to shoot us down on sight. Button isn't arresting us if he can help it."

"Waal, you've got some idea in yore mind," Owyhee muttered. "Mind sayin' what it is?"

"We've got water, a little grub on our saddles, even a bait of grain for the horses," Colt answered. "We'll stay here where we're safe while Button combs these hills. Not finding us, he may think we slipped through before he got the roads cut off. To-

Death would strike, swift and sure, if they were heard, so Colt plunged off the trail into the roaring stream.

night, we'll start looking for those Hook and Ladder steers that Frosty Winters and his pals ran off yesterday."

"That's quite an order," Owyhee declared pessimistically. "You've looked before for Button's rustled stuff and never found hide nor hair of it. What makes you think you'll have any better luck this time?"

"What we witnessed up in the meadows yesterday afternoon. When I saw those gents pass up those weaners, I knew I'd been all wrong in figuring that Button's spread on Bottle Creek was just a blind for his rustling operations and that if I looked long enough over there I'd find out just how he was handling the stuff his ring was stealing. I was looking in the wrong place."

Young Lin quickly caught the drift of all this.

"You're dead right, Colt!" he declared. "Button's got that stuff corralled somewhere north of here. Where you aimin' to look first?"

"Coon Flats," answered Colt. "It is wild, tangled country, but there's a way north of there—east of the old Ashdown Mine. If we find those steers, our fight is half won, Lin. I'll get to Stack in a hurry with the information."

"But Jeb Stack picked Button for sheriff," Lin exclaimed. "He couldn't have been elected if Stack hadn't boosted him."

Colt smiled grimly. "That's what I'm counting on—that double cross," he declared. "You can't argue with Stack, but you don't have to when you show him something that he can

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see with his own eyes. You boys turn in now for an hour or two. I'll call you then and you can spell me off for a while. If you've still got that letter you had for me, Lin, I'll take it now."

Lin handed it over.

"How is my father?" Colt asked.

"Good as he could be, with him always worrying about you gettin' into more trouble and wonderin' if he's ever goin' to see you again."

"He may be seeing me sooner than he expects," Colt murmured as he opened the letter.

CHAPTER III

NIGHT CALL

NOON had come and gone when a low whistle from Owyhee brought Colt and Lin to his side in a hurry.

"Someone comin'," Owyhee muttered. "Lissen!"

Colt nodded. The sound of horses moving over the loose rock along the creek bed was unmistakable. "There's two or three of them," he warned. "Just sit tight. They may go right on by without ever guessing we're here."

"Supposin' yo're wrong; what do we do then?" Owyhee questioned. "If it's case of them or us, we better shoot first."

"Don't let me catch you doing any shooting," Colt admonished. "We'll keep these gents covered from the second they show up. If they head in here, we'll make them reach for the ceiling. Dead men won't make things any easier for Lin and me."

Ten seconds later he snapped to attention. Three riders could be seen slowly picking their way up the creek. One of them was Ike Button; the other two were Hook and Ladder punchers. The irony of Jed Stack's men being used to help run them down was too much for young Lin.

"The gall of that rat, Button!" he muttered under his breath. "Robbin' the Hook and Ladder blind and havin' the crust to use Stack's own men against us so he can go on stealin' from him!"

"Quiet!' Colt warned.

The three men came on, scanning the canyon walls and the pockets below the rimrocks, until they were less than twenty yards away. Colt held his breath as they came abreast the mouth of the cave. Button flashed a suspicious glance at the clump of mahogany brush. For a second Colt thought he was going to call a halt. But they went on, rifles half raised. A few yards more, and then they did stop.

"Better leave our broncs here," Button said. "This is about as far as we're goin' to git, even on foot. There ain't a chance of gittin' all the way through to Coon Flats."

In a short time they had disappeared up the canyon.

"Button was quick to say they couldn't get through to the Flats, wasn't he?" Colt's laugh was bitter. "Something there he doesn't want any Hook and Ladder man to see!"

The three men returned half an hour later. They paused to smoke a cigarette before mounting and heading back down the canyon. Colt had reached a decision by the time they were well gone.

"I've changed my mind about waiting for nightfall," he told Lin and Owyhee. "You boys stay here. I'm going to see what there is in Coon Flats. With the creek as low as it is, I can get through."

"How long you figgerin' to be gone?" Owyhee asked.

"Its less than three miles. With luck, I'll be back during the afternoon. I won't bother with a horse."

He struck out boldly, confident that he had the upper canyon to himself. Before long the walls grew steeper, pinching the North Fork between them. Here, the creek was a minor torrent. Often the shelving bank disappeared altogether and Colt was forced to take to the stream. Once the debris left by an old cloudburst stopped him and he wasted the better part of an hour clearing a path through it. Forty yards beyond, he ran into barbed wire.

"I guess that about tells the story," he thought. "Button had this wire put up so his rustled stuff couldn't drift down the creek. There's no other reason for it being here."

Presently the creek began to widen and Colt knew he had reached the Flats. Coming to another turning, he picked his way up the west slope and was finally able to look down on a little parklike meadow studded with aspens and cottonwoods. One glance was enough to corroborate his suspicions; the flat was alive with grazing steers. The grass was good in here and the cattle appeared as much at home as though they were on their own range.

"About seventy head here, and ninety percent Hook and Ladder," Colt told himself.

He knew better than to suppose that the steers were not being guarded. He changed his position several times, hoping to get a glimpse of the men Button had here, but it was not until a thin spiral of smoke from a supper fire caught his eye that he located two men, camped under a cottonwood. One of them was Grat Pierce, long one of Ike Button's cronies.

It was all Colt needed to know. Retracing his way back to the cave,

he told Owyhee and Lin what he had discovered.

"I'm going to do something about this before Button has a chance to move that stuff," he went on. "I can't get to Stack too soon. If I leave now, it will be dark before I get out of the canyon."

"We better go with you," Lin suggested. "You're almost dead sure to run into trouble, Colt."

"I'll be better off by myself," Colt insisted. "I want the two of you to stay here. I expect to bring Stack back with me."

A SINGLE light burned in Jed Stack's house as Colt reconnoitered it from the far side of the ranch yard. Whether Button was prosecuting his man hunt from here was a question. Certainly he was no stranger at this ranch. Mindful of what he might be walking into, Colt approached the house warily. He was relieved to find that the light burned in Stack's office and that the owner of the Hook and Ladder was alone.

Stack swung around in his chair as Colt's step sounded in the doorway. Surprise held him motionless for a moment, then he reached for a gun.

"Forget it," Colt advised. "I've got something to tell you that will hand you a stiffer jolt than seeing me here."

"You've got nothin' to say to me that I want to listen to," Stack flung back with cold hostility. "There used to be some sympathy for you hereabouts, Williams—but no more. After last night, you ain't got no standin' with anyone, least of all with me. You and your friends won't rustle no more stuff from me. Cape Maynard is in jail, and it's only a matter of hours before you and that young pup who ran off with you will be there, too."

"So Button framed a case against Cape, too!" Colt ground out. "I might have known it—"

Stack hauled himself to his feet, snorting with fury. "I'd expect you to say that," he roared. "The evidence was plain enough. Ike only done his duty. I don't intend to stand for no more out of you!" He reached for the bell cord to summon his crew.

"Wait!" Colt said warningly. "I didn't come here to call Button names or argue with you. After all, Jeb, you're no fool; you know Hook and Ladder steers when you see them. You don't know it, but there's sixty-seventy head of your best beef steers bunched in Coon Flats this minute ready to be pushed across the line into Oregon. I want to show 'em to you."

"Coon Flats?" Stack burst out, his face purpling. "How'd they git there?"

"I'm going to leave that to you," said Colt. He put his gun down on the table. "Just to prove this isn't any trick, there's my gun. If I don't make my words good, you can turn me over to Button."

Stack glared at him a full minute before he spoke.

"All right, tell yore story," he said finally. "I'll listen to it."

Colt gave him a complete account of what he had seen in Piute Meadows and followed it up with a terse recital of what had happened at Cape Maynard's place. A few words more acquainted Stack with what had transpired in the canyon that day. The story staggered him, and though he refused adamantly to credit it, doubt and suspicion had clearly been aroused in him.

"Williams, yo're either tellin' the truth or yo're the most convincin' liar I ever listened to!" he ground

out. He shook his head, a thoroughly baffled man. "If what you tell me is so, I'm the biggest fool in seven States! I'd never be able to live it down—me, the chairman of the county commissioners! You must be lyin'!"

"It won't take long to prove it," Colt reminded him. "If you'll go with me—"

"Oh, I'm goin' all right!" Stack thundered. "I got to go now! I got to know!"

CHAPTER IV

COLT SHOWS HIS PROOF

WITH Colt leading the way, they struck up the canyon of the North Fork less than two hours later. The moon was up, helping to point out the way. Stack made the ride in a dour, forbidding silence. Grim-lipped, he waited for Owyhee and Lin to join them in answer to Colt's call. Tales of Button's treachery and crookedness that he had dismissed as the work of the sheriff's political enemies, came back to him, and he found he could not dismiss them tonight.

"We'll leave our horses here," Colt said. "We're going to get wet. There's three or four places where we'll be in the water up to our waist. Just keep coming, and don't make the mistake of using your guns if you hear anything. The creek's noisy enough at night to cover up any sound we make. You bring up the rear, Owyhee, and don't drop too far behind."

When they reached the barbed wire that was strung across the creek, Stack ripped out an angry cure. He didn't have to be told what it meant. A few yards more and Colt came to the spot where he had climbed the slope that afternoon.

"We'll stick to the creek tonight," he said. "I want you to be sure of what you're seeing."

Moving ahead cautiously, they found themselves well out out on the Flat in the course of another ten minutes. Colt was about to call a halt when a wrathful snort from Stack brought them up short.

"By Joseph, the stuff's here, all right!" he jerked out. "Bedded down over there beyond the trees. I'm goin' to have a better look at them steers!"

"They'll be in motion the minute you head toward them," Colt cautioned. "Here—take a look out there where the moonlight is filtering down along the creek. There's half a dozen cows still grazing. What do you see?"

"Hook and Ladder!" Stack burst out. "Every last one of 'em!"

COLT had been trying to locate the rustlers' fire. He had just caught its dim glow when it blazed up fiercely as someone tossed on a clump of dead sage. The bright light revealed the man staring intently across the Flat as though some suspicious sound had reached him. Convinced that he had been mistaken, he turned to the four men lounging about the fire, and Colt and the others saw that it was Button. Colt was just in time to check the outburst that rushed to Stack's lips.

"Keep still," he warned. "He's spooky as it is."

Button's horse was ground-tied a few feet away. "I'm headin' for town," they heard the sheriff say as he started for the bronc. "You git this stuff movin' at the crack of dawn, boys. We can't afford to be caught with it on our hands with Williams on the loose. We got to take it easy for a spell."

"What about Cape Maynard?" a man asked. "He knows too much, Ike. He'll spill it when he gets on the stand on Friday."

"Don't worry about Maynard," Button laughed wickedly. "A lot of things can happen between now and Friday." With a nod to his men, he swung into his saddle and rode off.

Stack was so consumed with rage that he was panting for breath. Colt laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Don't let a sound out of you," he warned him. "You've got until daylight to do something about this. We're getting out of here now."

Old Jeb nodded. "I'll do plenty about it," he growled threateningly. "Git me back to my horse."

Once safely out of earshot of the men at the fire, he broke loose with a torrent of words, bitterly denouncing Button for the scoundrel he was and swearing to make short work of him and his gang of blacklegs. Young Lin listened to him for a moment, then made his way over to Colt.

"Stack's thinking only about his steers," the boy said in a low voice. "What about Cape?"

"Don't worry, Lin," Colt answered. "Stack will have to play things my way now. We'll have it out before he leaves us."

"He better lissen to you," Owyhee growled. "If my hearin' is still good, Button is figgerin' on killin' that lad before he gits to trial."

They had no sooner reached the cave than old Jeb demanded that his horse be brought out at once. "I ain't got no time to waste now," he told Colt. "I won't fergit what you've done fer me, Colt. You and the Maynards are goin' to git a clean bill of health—I promise you that. But it will have to wait a day or two."

"Jeb, it can't wait," Colt said flatly. "You heard what Button said. Cape's mouth is going to be closed before he ever gets to trial. Button thinks by now that Lin and I have made a getaway, and that if he can stop Cape his game is still good."

"Waal, what do you want me to do about that?" Stack demanded impatiently. "I ain't tippin' Button off to anythin' that'll make 'em run. I want to see the whole dang pack of rats washed out. If I make a move, it's got to be the right one."

"OF COURSE," Colt agreed promptly. "And this is it: When those steers are moved at daylight, they'll have to be sent north by way of the Ashtown Trail. You've got time enough to get your chew in the saddle and block that country off. What you do with those gents when you nail 'em is your own business. Just make sure that not a whisper of what happens gets back to Wild Horse before the trial. And here's another thing, and it's important: I want you to get back to town as early as you can tomorrow. Give any reason you want for being there."

Stack lifted his shaggy brows. "What's the idea of that?"

"Just this. When you leave now, the three of us are riding into Wild Horse. We're going to do some shooting and create a little excitement. It'll be for effect, Jeb. I want Button to know I'm still around and kicking. It'll slow up his plans to plant a gun or a hack saw on Cape and claim he caught him in an attempted escape and had to kill him."

"That still don't tell me what I'm to do," Stack pointed out impatiently.

"What you're to do is this: Insist that I'm going to try to free

Maynard; that you want extra guards posted in the jail. You see that they're your men, and warn them not to let Cape out of their sight for a second."

Stack wagged his head. "I'm beginnin' to get you now—and purty smart it is. You can count on me doin' my part."

"There's just one thing more, Jeb," Colt said. "I'm going to take a hand in that trial. I'll let it get started. Then I'm going in. I want you in town with men enough to back up my play. Stay up the street a block or so and keep your eye on the courthouse. When you see me step inside, start walking, and don't let nothing stop you from following me in. Don't fail me, Jeb. I'll be depending on you."

"Don't worry; I'll be there," Stack assured him. He mounted his horse and headed for home.

CHAPTER V

THE BODYGUARD

IT lacked a few minutes of six when three men rode furiously down the main street of Wild Horse. In the clear, hard light of early morning the town was an ugly huddle of buildings. The street itself was deserted at that hour, save for old Chris, a porter, who was sluicing down the steps in front of the hotel.

Chris took one look at the three riders, saw them whip out their guns and, in his haste to get in the clear, tipped over his bucket as he darted indoors. Before he could catch his breath, the guns were banging. The three men were racing toward the jail and adjoining courthouse, firing as rapidly as they could work trigger.

Frosty Winters, Button's chief deputy, who was on duty at the jail, stuck his head out of the door, recognized Colt and young Lin and pulled his head in as though he were a turtle. Slamming the door shut

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behind him, he flung himself on the floor behind Button's desk. The next moment a slug shattered a window above his head.

"Ike, they're here for Maynard!" he yelled, forgetting that the sheriff was at home, a block away.

But though that frightened cry for help failed to reach the sheriff, the bucking guns were enough to tumble him out of bed in a hurry. In fact, by now the whole town was aroused.

Colt, Lin and Owyhee had swept around the corner and, pausing only long enough to reload, unloosed another blast. Irate citizens were rushing out of doors, clutching rifles and six-guns. Seeing the three men, they began to shoot without knowing exactly what was afoot. The slugs began to kick up the dust dangerously close.

"Them fools is shootin' fer keeps!" Owyhee growled. "Time fer us to be makin' tracks!"

Colt gave the word and they dashed out of town leaving confusion and excitement behind them. Button reached the jail a few minutes after they had gone.

"About time you was showin' up," Winters greeted him. The story he had to tell did not improve Button's temper.

"Why did you let 'em git away?" he roared. "Why didn't you burn 'em down, you fool!"

"I held 'em off, didn't I?" Winters demanded, though he had not fired a shot. "You better be decidin' what yo're goin' to do if they come back."

"I like to see 'em try it!" was But-

"You'll never git away with this tinhorn play, Williams," the sheriff growled. "You're in so deep you'll never git out."

ton's enraged retort. "But I ain't waitin' around on that chance. We're sittin' on a keg of dynamite with Colt Williams runnin' loose."

"It was yore idea we'd seen the last of him," Winters reminded sourly.

"Of course it was! And I was wrong! Don't stand there tossin' words at me! Git half a dozen of the boys and go after Williams and that young pup Maynard! And git that old owlhoot who's ridin' with 'em! Don't come back till you've run 'em out of the country or nailed for keeps. I'll take care of things here."

"We want to be back for the trial, don't we?"

"Trial!" Button raged. "There won't be no trial! I got a pat hand now as far as Cape Maynard is concerned!"

WILD HORSE was still boiling with excitement when Jeb Stack rode into town two hours later, a grim, set look on his weather-beaten face. With characteristic dispatch he had attended to his early-morning business on the Ashdown Trail. The concluding, and by far the most important chapter, remained to be attended to, and he wanted to get on with it. Playing cat and mouse with Button was not to his liking; but his word had been passed and he did not hedge now. Ten minutes after he had been told of Colt's raid, he was closeted with the district attorney. Button was sent for. There was very little subterfuge in Stack, but somehow he succeeded in containing himself when the sheriff stepped into the room.

"There won't be any jail delivery here," Jeb declared with his usual positiveness when the preliminaries were over. "As head of the county government, I'm takin' steps to make sure of it."

"I can handle the situation," Button assured him. "I'll swear in a number of deputies—"

"You can swear in the whole town if you want to," Jeb retorted, "but I'm still doin' somethin'. I'm postin' two men to stand guard over Maynard, with orders to stick with him until he goes to trial tomorrow mornin'. And they'll be my men, Button—men with cool heads who know how to use a gun in an emergency."

The sheriff protested loud and long. Any such arrangement would completely tie his hands.

"Jeb, yo're makin' a mistake, buttin' in on me," he declared angrily. "I know how to run things."

Stack's malevolent grunt was almost too pointed. "I'm beginnin' to wonder whether you do or not," he growled. "Colt Williams has been playin' tag with you. You'll find Frank Portagras and Kize Lafoon waiting for you downstairs; they know what I want 'em to do. Just so there won't be no slip up, I'll go down with you."

THERE was an old ice house on the southern edge of town. That was the place Colt, Lin and Owyhee had chosen as a hide-out. Hidden there, they had seen Frosty Winters and his posse ride past in pursuit of them.

"Nothing to do now but wait and hope that no one stumbles in here," Colt observed. "It's going to be slow work."

By the time the sun had swung around to the west, Owyhee's nerves were badly on edge. "You suppose Stack is keepin' to his end of the deal?" he asked. "We ain't seen hide nor hair of him."

"It ain't likely we will," Colt an-

swered. "I told you that. He'd come in from the north, and he'd leave that way. As to whether we can count on him or not—it's too late to start asking that. I'm going ahead with full faith in Stack."

Owyhee slipped out after dark and bought some food in the Basque section of the town. He had news for Colt on his return.

"Stack was in town fer a few minutes this mornin'," he announced. "He's got a couple men posted in the jail. Not a whisper about any showdown north of Coon Flats this mornin'. Winters and his posse are back, though. Winters' story is that he chased us clean out of Nevada."

"Good!" Colt ejaculated.

"Good?" Owyhee echoed gruffly. "What's good about it? That courtroom is goin' to be jammed tomorrow mornin'. You got any idea what you'll be steppin' into?"

"I've got a pretty good idea," Colt grinned. "I've dealt myself a hand this time that I'm going to play to the limit."

CHAPTER VI

TRIAL BY SIX-GUN

THE townsfolk gathered early for the trial. There were men present who knew Ike Button for what he was and hated him accordingly. Others, honest dupes, were there to applaud the vigilance that had brought Cape Maynard to the bar of justice.

Button had his look at the crowd. Save for Frank Portagras and Kize Lafoon, there wasn't a Hook and Ladder man in the room. That struck the sheriff as strange without arousing his suspicion. In fact he was vaguely relieved not to have Stack's forces there.

Button also noted with satisfaction that old Fenelon, the attorney for the defense, was a little drunker than usual. He had seen to that, for he had been busy from the moment that Stack's dogged interference had convinced him that the trial could not be avoided. He did not propose that it should take long. The judge and prosecutor were in no sense parties to his scheming, but he had used them to his own ends before, and he believed he had them lined up this time.

It did not take long to select the jury. Cape Maynard watched the proceedings with a sober interest. At first, he had taken his arrest lightly enough, for he considered the charges against him so preposterous that no jury on earth could convict him. He had long since changed his mind about that, and as his gaze roved over the courtroom he could not help feeling that Colt Williams' foray and Lin's participation in it had prejudiced everyone against him.

Frosty Winters and Button's other deputies occupied the front benches, just beyond the railings. Cape knew they were there to swear him into prison if lying would do it. Behind them sat Colt's father. He was the only friendly face Cape could find.

Suddenly the judge rapped his gavel. "If the prosecution is ready, we will proceed," he announced. The district attorney nodded. The charge was read and the sheriff was asked to take the stand.

"It'll be a pleasure," Button said with a wicked grin as he swaggered to the witness chair.

In the alley opposite the courthouse Colt, Lin and Owyhee slid from their saddles. Things were not going as they had planned, and the fact was reflected in their tense faces.

"Somethin's gone wrong," Owyhee

repeated. "Stack aint in Wild Horse. We've stalled around as long as we dare. If he was comin', he'd be here by now."

"That forces our hand," said Colt. "We'll have to make our play without him."

Owyhee exploded with an oath. "You crazy?" he demanded. "Two men and a boy! We can't git away with it!"

"We'll never know whether we can or not until we try," argued Colt. "There's only two doors in that courtroom. The side door leads to the jail. Lin will cover it. You cover the main door. I'll go right up the aisle to the bench. The crowd will be listennig to the witnesses. Before anyone knows what's happening we'll have the jump on them. A little bluffing will do the rest. Come on now. We'll go in together."

The three of them abreast, they climbed the stairs and reached the courtroom door. Button was still on the stand. The crowd was intent on what he was saying. Lin headed for the side door and Colt walked boldly up the aisle. He was within a few feet of the railing before his presence was noted.

"It's Colt Williams!" someone cried abruptly.

LOOKING up, Button was struck helpless for a moment. A hush fell over the crowded room. Frosty Winters and his cohorts stared like men turned to stone for a second. It was all the time Colt needed.

"Sit still and don't go for your guns," he warned. "This room is covered from a dozen directions." He backed through the gate and took up a position alongside the bench. "You folks out there ain't in no danger of getting hurt if you'll keep your heads."

There was a moment's indecision, and then the crowd settled back,

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awed and silent. But Judge Eph Burdick, who had sat on the bench in Wild Horse since the court had been established, was not to be so easily cowed.

"You can't come in here, Williams,

and take a prisoner out of my court!" he cried, shaking his gavel at Colt.

"That's not my intention at all, judge," Colt assured him. "The trial will continue in just a minute."

He discovered his father then. There was a silent appeal in the old man's troubled eyes, begging this son of his to commit no further breach of the peace.

"Don't worry, dad," Colt told him. "What I do here will not bring any shame on you. You just step through the gate now and relieve those rats in the front row of their guns. I'll get yours, Button."

For a split second the sheriff's arm tensed as though he was about to draw. Something in Colt's eyes made him hesitate and finally change his mind.

"That was a wise decision, Button," Colt said. "Take those handcuffs off Cape now."

"You must be mad to do this," Maynard told him. "You're not helping me any, Colt."

Colt did not waste breath replying. When the handcuffs had been removed and his father had stacked the deputies' guns on the judge's bench, he handed Button's gun to Cape. "Just stay where you are, and if Frosty Winters and that bunch of buzzards alongside him try to make a break, bust 'em in their tracks." He turned to the judge then. "You can proceed now," he said. "Only you've got a new defendant and a new prosecutor. It's Ike Button who's on trial here—and I'm going to convict him."

"Hog dang it!" Burdick roared, "this ain't legal!"

"Justice is all I'm after," Colt retorted. "You can have the legal end of it."

This struck the fancy of that part of the crowd long suspicious of Button. A man cheered and a dozen others took it up. The judge, forgetting that the proceedings were irregular, banged for order. A harried look crept into the sheriff's eyes, as though in this outburst of feeling he found an indication of which way the wind was blowing.

Colt's attention was riveted on Button, and his eyes burned with the contempt he felt for the man. But he wasn't underestimating Button. The sheriff had followers here in Wild Horse who were not in the courtroom. It needed only a shouted word from a window, one man getting past Owyhee or Lin, to bring help in such numbers that the tables would be turned in a hurry. For the hundredth time Colt asked himself what could be keeping Stack. Wouldn't the Hook and Ladder owner ever get here?

Button seemed to sense Colt's momentary hesitation. It made him bold. "You'll never git away with this cheap tinhorn play, Williams!" he burst out fiercely. "A bluff don't fool me!"

"One fooled you yesterday," Colt answered him. "I wasn't making any raid on the jail, Button. That was a play to give Stack an excuse for putting Portagras and Lafoon in Maynard's cell so we could have a trial and not a funeral. You've played a sure thing a long time, but the bottom has dropped out of your crooked game. You won't frame another man or railroad anybody else off to jail because they knew too much about your business. You're the rustler who's been robbing this range blind! You and Winters and a dozen more of your trained skunks!"

IT'S a lie!" Button shouted above the din. "If you didn't have a gun at my head I'd cram them words down yore throat!" He appealed to the crowd for support, and those who still had faith in him raised an angry outcry. "You know, men, that Jeb Stack ain't havin' no dealin's with this lyin' hound!"

"Of course we know it!" a man answered. Others echoed the sentiment.

"You better wait until the returns are in from Coon Flats and the Ashdown Trail," was Colt's reply.

That was a bombshell as far as Button was concerned. Fear, cold and relentless, gripped him now and there was no dissembling the fact. Winters and the others were no less taken back. Knowing he had played a trump card, Colt walked up to the jury box and, without wasting a word, related what had happened in Piute Meadows and at the Maynard ranch. By now the courtroom was still. Men were hanging on Colt's words as he led up to his discovery of the steers in Coon Flats.

"Prove it!" Button cried. "You ain't got no proof at all!"

"The devil he ain't!" came a cry from the rear of the room. Colt whirled. Coming up the aisle was Jeb Stack. Behind him came Hook and Ladder twenty strong. Instantly the place was in a turmoil. Stack's punchers were pushing two men through the crowd. An angry shout went up as the spectators recognized the pair for two of Button's adherents.

"We're here a mite late," Jeb exclaimed. "We stopped to gather in this pair of crooks, Colt." He wiped his perspiring face on his sleeve. "Appears we arrived in time, though."

Judge Burdick was standing up and hammering the bench. "Jeb," he shouted, "can you restore order here?"

"I'll restore a big dose of it, and it'll be permanent before I'm through!" Stack answered. "Every word Colt has been tellin' you is the gospel truth." He shook a fist at the harassed-looking sheriff. "Button, you miserable skunk, this is yore finish! You trumped up every bit of evidence against Colt Williams and the Maynards to save yore own rotten skin. They're just as innocent as yo're guilty!"

Before he had finished his tale of what he had seen in Coon Flats, not the slightest doubt remained in any man's mind that he was right. But Jeb wasn't through.

"There's four of yore gang decoratin' the cottonwoods just north of the Flats," he threw at Button. "They said enough to send you to hell before they smoked their last cigarette."

"Git a rope!" a man shouted. "Take the whole blasted bunch outside an' give 'em what's comin' to 'em!"

AN angry chorus of approval mounted to a deafening roar. Button licked his dry lips. He knew he had come to the end of his tether. Desperation gave him courage. His gun and those taken from the men in the front row lay on the bench, only a few feet out of reach. He caught Winters' eye. Suddenly then, he lunged for the guns, grabbed one and knocked the others to the floor at the feet of his men. If they could reach the side door, they might yet fight their way out of this.

Button's fingers had no sooner closed around a gun than he began shooting. His first shot ripped through the judge's shoulder and tumbled Burdick out of his chair. Crouched down behind the bench, he fired again, the slug screaming so close to Stack that old Jeb blinked.

Winters and two others had armed themselves and made a leap toward the side door. Button darted after them, but he was a second too too late. Colt had flung forward and his rush sent both Button and himself sprawling.

Ike lost his gun in crashing to the floor, but he clutched Colt's weapon and turned it back on him. "Yo're comin' with me, Williams!" he grated savagely.

He spoke too soon. Old Owyhee had fought his way through the crowd. Eyes slitted, he blazed away at Button with his gun. At that distance, he couldn't miss.

Frosty Winters had reached the side door, kicked the gun out of young Lin's hand and was running toward the jail when Frank Portagras stopped him forever. It took the fight out of the rest. The crowd had sobered, too. Colt jumped up on a table and faced them.

"If there's any law left in this country, let's prove it!" he cried. "I'm speaking to you, Jeb! Put these men behind bars and stop this talk of stringing them up. We're starting a new deal here."

Jeb hesitated only a moment. "Colt's right!" he declared. "We'll have to lock up these coyotes. We've still got the law even though we ain't got a sheriff."

Old Owyhee stepped up beside Colt.

"What do you mean you ain't got a sheriff?" he demanded. "If you want a man who knows how to fight when the chips are down an' who's as square as the day is long, what's the matter with Colt Williams?"

For a second the crowd hesitated, and then a roar of leather-lunged approval rocked the room.

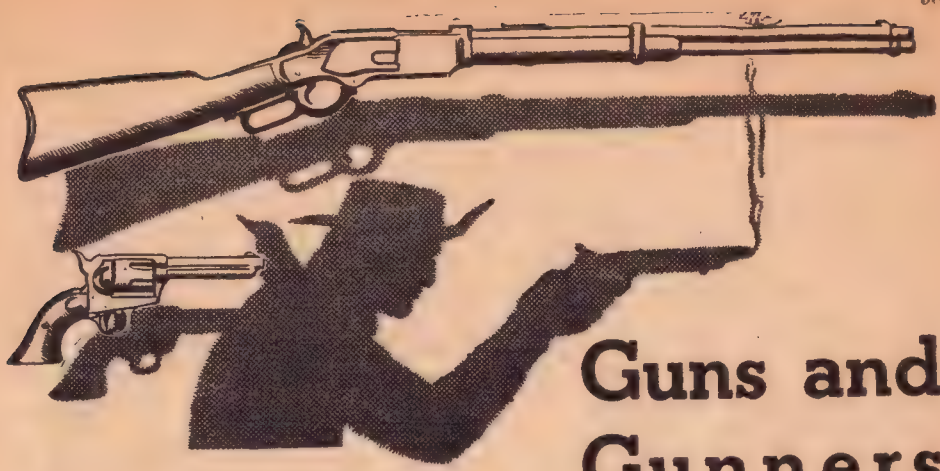
"Waal, I reckon that's settled," Owyhee screeched in Colt's ear. "Time for me to be driftin', pardner; I'd hate to be the first man you had to arrest."

Their glances held for a moment, and then before Colt could speak, the old rawhide leaped down from the table and lost himself in the crowd. Colt would have called him back, but he was too late.

Stunned by the sudden turn of events Colt stood there until Stack's gruff voice pulled him out of his daze.

"Git down here, Colt, and I'll pin this badge on you," Jeb commanded. "As soon as I can call a meetin' of the board, we'll make it legal. You and a couple good funerals appears to have been what Wild Horse has needed for a long time."

THE END.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

JUST the other day I got a letter from a chap who said he was interested in shooting, but didn't care much for this "new-fangled" game of shooting at targets. He wrote that he didn't think that target shooting would last more than lots of other new ideas, and preferred to use his flint rifle just for hunting and general plinking around.

It started your firearms editor thinking: "New-fangled game?" Something like two hundred years ago there was rifle shooting in competitive target work here, and organized target shooting in the territory which later was to become the United States. In other words, target shooting in this country is older than the United States.

According to Ned Roberts, himself a modern rifleman and responsible for the design of the .25 and .257 Roberts cartridges, American flintlocks with the improved slender type of stock and carefully rifled barrel using a patched or cloth-wrapped round ball came into use in this country around 1700.

About that time the rifle industry in the new world really got its start. European rifles made previous to that date, principally by German and Swiss rifle makers, were found to be very impractical for use in the American wilderness. The arms were too heavy, the bore too large, and the guns too inaccurate. Big-bore guns did not prove too popular with the pioneers due to the scarcity of both powder and lead. Also, the loading was slow and tedious, since it was necessary to drive home the large raw lead ball with an iron ramrod and mallet. These old imported guns would foul so badly in five

The following list of literature is available to our readers: STRAIGHT SHOOTING, SNAP SHOOTING, WINCHESTER AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, SAVAGE, STEVENS, FOX, COLT, SMITH & WESSON, HARRINGTON & RICHARDSON, 3c each; MOSSBERG, MARLIN, 2c each; WESTERN AMMUNITION HANDBOOK, 5c; REMINGTON ARMS AND AMMUNITION, 6c; and a large three-pound bundle of assorted catalogs, 30c each and 38c west of Chicago. None can be sent to Canada. Postage stamps are accepted.

Application blanks for membership in the National Rifle Association may be obtained by writing to Mr. Sharpe. Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp with your request.

shots that no one could depend upon them to hit a man at fifty yards.

Why did the old-timers use such tremendous long barrels? Those of us who have seen and handled some of the really old weapons recall that they frequently stood as high as a man. Ned Roberts gives the reason. He tells me that the long barrel was built to contain as much metal as possible to absorb the sound when fired. This was necessary for squirrel or Indian hunting or otherwise shooting at wild game.

The famous Kentucky rifle was born in Pennsylvania, and the manufacture started around 1710. German and Swiss rifle makers, together with a few Dutchmen, moved into Pennsylvania. They developed a new type of rifle better adapted to American requirements and experimented with this until around 1730, when the Kentucky rifle was really born. This rifle was strictly American and proved so far superior to any that the world had before known that it was in a class by itself. These rifles were deadly and accurate at ranges up to one hundred and fifty yards, and frequently at much greater distances. Users of these rifles met in competition.

This competitive target shooting with the old-time black powder rifles caused gun makers to put their best into a gun and develop even more accurate arms. Some of these guns will equal in accuracy the modern high-power smokeless cartridge arm and in many cases will outshoot them.

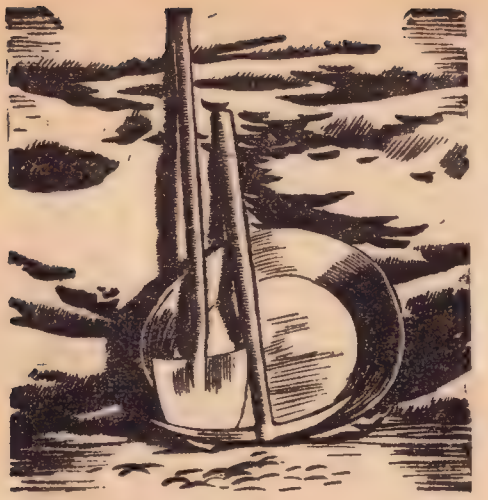
The reason for great accuracy in the old-time guns is quite apparent. They were single-shot muzzle loaders. It took some time to reload and under those circumstances, the hunter or rifleman could not afford to miss. He was an expert shot and he demanded expert equipment.

In the early 1800s, most shooting matches were of the live-turkey type. Two types of shooting were permitted—fifteen rods offhand and twenty rods rest shooting with a live turkey tied to a stake. To win a turkey, one had to draw blood. The off-hand range of fifteen rods meant 247 feet, while the rest shooting range of twenty rods meant 330 feet. These ranges were used as far back as Colonial days. Each man fired but one shot.

With the improvement of percussion ignition, ranges were increased to forty-rod shooting—220 yards—and by 1840 this was the accepted range. Even after the muzzle-loading percussion types went out, and the breech loaders came in, the target riflemen still stuck to muzzle loading, using a bullet seated from the muzzle with an attachment known as a false muzzle. The bullet was pushed down to the chamber to meet in contact the cartridge case filled with black powder, and loaded more or less as a blank cartridge. This type of shooting lasted until around 1890.

These old-time target shooters not only could shoot, but had the equipment to do it. Many of the records of the old muzzle-loading black powders stood on the books for many long years before modern riflemen with their smokeless powder arms could improve upon them.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

THE trend of many modern placer-gold prospectors who know the game is still toward central Idaho. That vast, only partially prospected, richly mineralized wilderness section is rapidly opening up. A number of prospectors working in the North Fork of the Clearwater River area last season reported a take of roughly a thousand dollars, more or less, in placer gold.

That is better than wages. Wage-grade gravel in that section is stuff that will bring the hand operator about two dollars a day in gold.

H. L., of El Paso, Texas, who says he has long been interested in the gold placer possibilities of the off-the-trail sections in central Idaho, particularly around the North Fork of the Clearwater River, plans to head out that way this coming spring. "Just how accessible, or inaccessible, is the country?" he asks. "Any roads? How long is the open placer-mining season? Is the water supply dependable all summer? How much would it cost two fellows to live out there per month? What creeks or general sectors would you recommend? Is the gold coarse or fine?"

Those are sound, practical questions. We'll take them one at a time in the order of their asking.

First the North Fork of the Clearwater River area is not as inaccessible today as many believe. The main camps at least have roads reaching them. Many of the roads, in fact most of them, are steep and narrow as befits roads in wilderness mountain country. But with a car in good mechanical condition, and a driver who isn't nervous when it comes to skirting cliffs on a narrow, open-faced dirt highway, they can be driven over.

However, provide yourself with facilities for carrying along your own supply of extra oil and gas, besides your regular camping equipment. The old gold camp of Pierce is about the only place where such supplies can be obtained out there just now.

In addition to the available roads, the United States Forest Service has laid out a large number of readily followed trails that will take you into the out-of-the-way places. Many of the latter can be reached with only about five miles of "packing in" necessary.

The placer season is governed each year by the extent of the snows the previous winter, as this determines the spring and summer water supply. Following an exceptionally light winter, water may give out in many of the smaller creeks by July. Usually it lasts longer, sometimes well through the "open" season. As far as climate is concerned, the open season generally runs from the latter part of April, or the begin-

ning of May, until about the first of November.

Outdoor living costs for campers always depends largely on the skill of the individual in planning the camp commissary. Considering simply wholesome food, two men ought to get by comfortably on about a twenty-dollar-a-month outlay, especially if they will make good use of dried foods and dried fruits, and go light on the more expensive canned goods. If you want to take time out for hunting and fishing during the open seasons for same, the cash grub bill can be still further reduced.

As to areas, from Dicks Creek, below Dent, up the river to Moscow Bar, has been profitable to individuals in the past for hand mining after high water has gone down in the spring. Prospecting tributary creeks in this area might also be a good bet. Another reportedly good area is above Cedars on Long, Chamberlain, Meadow and Dill Creeks, and up Vanderbilt Gulch. In fact, roughly the whole Vanderbilt Gulch-Dill Creek section south to the country around Moose City is probably a general region in which further placer-gold prospecting might prove fruitful.

Down around the old gold camp of Pierce, where gold was first discovered in Idaho in 1860, the Democrat Mountain vicinity, which, because of its comparatively greater inaccessibility, has not heretofore received very much attention, is another general neighborhood that might be worth a good try.

The placer gold found and mined up around the North Fork of the Clearwater is mostly what is locally known as "heavy" gold. The particles may be small, but because they are more or less equidimensional they settle rapidly and are easily saved. It only takes about six or eight feet of sluice-box length to catch most of the gold values as a rule, though in some of the deposits which have a lot of clay mixed in the gravel thorough washing is required to save the finer particles. Small nuggets occur and have been found throughout the placer area.

Another item favoring hand methods of gold placering, especially in the small patches occasionally found in which the yardage values are relatively high, is the fact that depth to bedrock is not excessive. The average seems to be about twelve or fifteen feet, with a two-and-a-half to three-foot layer of pay gravel above it. At times gold values have been found penetrating rotted bedrock to about a foot.

To J. K., of Maplewood, Missouri: Though Idaho is known primarily as a gold, lead, zinc and silver-mining State, many occurrences of the so-called "strategic" minerals have already been found there. Many of these different mineral finds are just in the known-to-exist state at present, but there is a good chance that more intensive prospecting and development might produce deposits with definite commercial possibilities.

• We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

We have an irate letter here from a soldier stationed down in the Canal Zone who says, "you so-called Pen Pals are a washout." He and his buddy have answered seven letters and have not received one in return and from where they sit it looks like some of you "just want to see your names in print." We were mighty sorry to hear that anyone feels that way about the Hollow Tree, for we know that most of the folks who send us letters are sincere in their requests for friends. We'd like to see these boys give us another chance and we have lots of fine letters this week to entice them, for instance the one below from Selma Troy. How about it, boys, will you try again? Here's our first letter:

Dear Miss Rivers:

How about the rest of the wranglers moving over and making room for a city gal who ain't never seen a dogie or a lasso, but who can boast of four-and-one-half-years' reading acquaintance with them. Yep! That's how long I've been reading Western Story and it's getting better all the time. This is my second try at breaking into print, so I'm hoping you'll publish my plea for Pen Pals this time. I'm nineteen and still a maverick, so come on, all you cow nurses, and start makin' hen tracks on paper. All letters cheerfully answered.—Selma Troy, 41-06 Vernon Boulevard, Long Island City, New York

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This marine will tell you about China—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely U. S. marine stationed at Peking, China, with the American Embassy Guard. I am twenty-eight years old and would like to correspond with men and women from eighteen to sixty. I can tell some interesting stories about the life and the duties of a marine in China, so let's have lots of letters; the more, the merrier time I will have answering them all.—Ch. Ck. H. A. Miller, Hdqs. Det. M. D. A. E., c/o Postmaster, San Francisco, California

Willetha wants to hear from all over—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a girl in my teens and like some sports, especially tennis and bicycle riding. I would like to hear from Pen Pals all over the world, especially foreign countries, but will answer all letters. Won't you all write to me?—Willetha Mohme, New Douglas, Illinois

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Calling all Reaves—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I break into the Hollow Tree? I am a shut-in looking for Pen Pals. Anyone may write. I'd like to hear from all those who have the same last name I have, especially from North Carolina and Bedsford County, Tennessee. Will answer all letters and exchange photos.—Johnnie W. Reaves, 701 E. 18th Avenue, Denver, Colorado

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Rose is going to need plenty of spare time—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Ever since I started reading Western Story magazine I have wanted to become a member of the Hollow Tree. Won't you please publish my request for Pen Pals? I am seventeen years old and am willing to sling some ink anywhere in the world. It's quite a task, but if you write the letters, I'll answer. I am a senior in Troy High School and love to read, dance, swim, roller skate and write letters. In fact I like to do almost everything. I promise to send a snapshot to all Pen Pals, so please write.—Rose Zalinka, 1 Cross Street, Troy, New York

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Barney wants lots of mail, too—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a rough-and-ready ink slinger who's bankering for some victims to shoot letters at. I'm often called the "demon ink slinger of 109th Street." So, all you guys and gals who fancy yourselves quick on the draw, go for your pens and try and swamp me with letters. I dare you one and all! I am a six-footer, twenty-two years old and I'll answer every letter I get and help you all with your hobbies. I'll exchange

photos and everything except livestock. I'd even trade that, for the Chicago stockyards are very near me, but they're fussy about it, so that's out. Of course, I was only fooling about the livestock, but I'm not fooling when I say, come on, Pals, see if you can give me a lame arm by sending me loads of letters.—Barney Moormann, 327 West 109th Street, Chicago, Illinois

Margaret is lonesome—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Would you please help out a lonely girl from Ohio? I like to write letters and am looking for some Pen Pals. I am a senior in high school and enjoy all indoor and outdoor sports. I'll be looking for your letters.—Margaret Lee, Route 6, Wapakoneta, Ohio

William is looking for a partner—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a reader of Western Story for ten years and have had a number of nice Pen Pals in that time. I am a single fellow in my late thirties and love outdoor life. This coming spring I am planning on a prospecting trip and would like to get in touch with some prospector with plenty of experience to go along with me. All those interested please get in touch with me. —William Luedtke, Willow's, Oregon

Elizabeth wants more pen friends—

Dear Miss Rivers:

A friend of mine wrote to the Hollow Tree a few weeks ago and got so many answers that I decided to try my luck. I am a sixteen-year-old girl in my junior year in high school. I live on a farm two miles from the small town of Rowan. I enjoy all sports, especially basketball, and my hobbies are collecting stamps and writing to Pen Pals. All the ones I have now are from foreign countries and I would like some in the United States. I promise to write to all and will exchange snapshots. Please write to me, everyone.—Elizabeth Wickman, Rowan, Iowa

From New Zealand comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am writing you these few lines to ask if you could find me some correspondents in your country. I am a lonely soldier stationed in a fort here in New Zealand and I would be glad to exchange points of view on different subjects. I am interested in physical training and studying the Morse code, and can tell you about things of interest in New Zealand. I am twenty-three years old and am particularly fond of travel and sports. I promise to answer all mail and will exchange photos.—Lawrence Edgecombe, Headquarters Section, Fort Palmer Head, Seatoun, Wellington E. 5, New Zealand

Middle-aged Pals answer this request—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May I have the pleasure of joining your group of Pen Pals? I love to travel, go camping and fishing and would love to hear from other Pals who have reached middle age and who are lonely. Let's get acquainted and help each other while away the lonely hours by exchanging our experiences.—Mrs. A. Hilmer, 1705 Linwood Boulevard, Kansas City, Missouri

James has some interesting things to relate—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a reader of Western Story for quite a while, but this is the first time I have written to the Hollow Tree. I have traveled some, been to Hollywood and can tell you some interesting things about it and about the hundreds of adventures I have had. I've seen the sun rise over the Funeral Range in Death Valley and have been in ghost towns, etc. My favorite sports are swimming, tennis and horseback riding. My hobbies are photography and collecting snaps. I would like to hear from people all over the world, and to the first twenty who write, I will send a snap of myself, so come on, boys and girls, and give a lonely boy a break.—James Neumeyer, Hurricane, West Virginia

Lauretta likes the movies—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a lonely girl of twenty-two and would like to hear from Pen Pals from all over the world, especially from the western part. My favorite pastimes are going to the movies, hiking and collecting pictures. Come on, Pals, give me a try, will you? I'll answer all letters.—Lauretta Proffit, Rt. No. 4, Box 78, Menahga, Minnesota

Here's an interesting letter from a CCC—

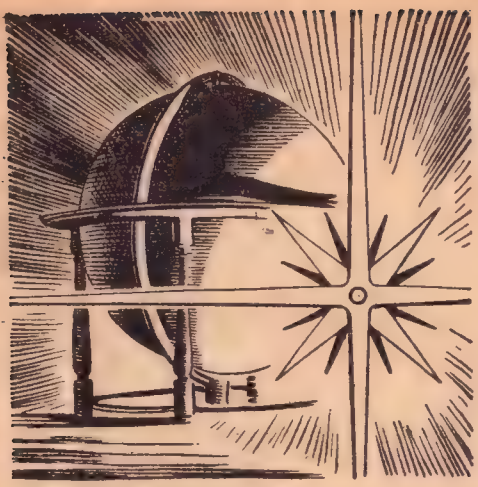
Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a reader of Western Story for some time and find the section devoted to the Hollow Tree-ites as interesting as the stories. I would really like to acquire some pen pushers as correspondents. My interests are mainly in landscaping. I hope to make my living working at this profession in the future. Horseback riding and every sport you can think of are my meat. I'm an outdoor enthusiast. Have done a lot of camping, hunting and some fishing. Photography and woodcraft are lesser hobbies. Can't think of anyone else you fellows and gals could write to who has more miscellaneous interests than I have. Variety and originality are my specialties. I have traveled quite a bit in the good old United States and went to the University of Illinois for a year. At present I am gaining practical experience in landscaping in the CCCs. I prefer Pen Pals around twenty years of age or within two or three years my junior. I guarantee that there will be no disappointment on my part if Pen Pals ask for an exchange of photos. Write one, write all.—Tex Wassman, CCC Company 3690, Jordan Valley, Oregon

This S O S comes from the U. S. S. Trippe—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I have been a devoted reader of the Hollow Tree column for some time and at last decided to write to you about some Pen Pals. I am a chief machinist mate aboard the destroyer *Trippe*, at present on neutrality duty in the Caribbean area and would enjoy very much hearing from some lonely souls back in the good old U. S. A. My experiences during the past sixteen years in the navy will no doubt be of interest to those who are travel bugs, and I will endeavor to paint realistically some of the points on the globe that I have visited. I hope you may be able to find space in your column for my letter and that Pen Pals will come to the aid of a lonely sailor in distress.—R. E. Walker, C. M. M., U. S. S. *Trippe*, F-403, c/o Postmaster, New York City, New York.



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING, making two blades of grass grow where but one grew before is the aim of progressive agriculture. Making anything grow in what was formerly semiarid, almost desert land is an even greater accomplishment. Yet this is just what is being done in the United States Bureau of Reclamation's Tucumcari irrigation project out in Quay County, New Mexico.

When completed, the Tucumcari project, comprising eight-one thousand acres of land, of which forty-three thousand and three hundred acres are irrigable by water supplied from dam-stored flood waters of the South Canadian River, will result in the opening for resettlement of a large area of what is at present virtually waste land. Irrigation means new homes for new settlers in this interesting part of fascinating New Mexico, and a practical assurance so far as is possible that crops suitable to the soil and climate can be raised on the land year in and year out.

The hazard of deficient rainfall that forced the abandonment of many of the earlier homesteads taken up in the vicinity will be eliminated by the canal-supplied and controllable flow of irrigation water. Moreover, inasmuch as the project is under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Reclamation, speculative land prices on the new farm units will be prohibited. An appraisal has already been made of the market value of the project lands in their present undeveloped condition. And such land as may be available will be sold on the basis of these fair and equitable prices.

That answers some of the pertinent queries in M. H.'s recent letter from Berkeley, California. "Mr. North," he wrote, "I am intensely interested in settling in New Mexico some place where I can make a farmland home for myself. The government irrigation project at Tucumcari about which I have been hearing rumors sounds as if reasonably priced land there might be my dish. Just where is Tucumcari situated? Where will the water for this irrigation come from? About how much land is involved? Will all of it be made suitable for farming? In short, any information you can give me will be much appreciated."

All right, M. H., here are some more facts and figures. First about the soils of the project. They range from sandy clay loam to silty clay loam of a dark, reddish-brown color, and their depth is generally in excess of twelve inches bottomed on a comparatively tight subsoil.

Not all the irrigable land involved is of the same agricultural value.

Preliminary surveys have divided the land into three classes, the first two of which constitute land considered to have sufficient agricultural possibilities to meet the pro rata assessments necessary for the ultimate liquidation of the construction charges involved in the project. The third class of land is leaner. It may produce crops of native hay, but is not considered rich enough to cover water and canal-digging costs.

The amount of land in each classification is as follows: Class 1, 16,500 acres; Class 2, 30,800 acres; Class 3, 2,500 acres.

There is still time to investigate thoroughly the settlement opportunities opened up in the Southwest by this project. Contract construction work on the principal irrigation canals was only started last spring. The main canal when completed will have an over-all length of seventy-five miles. But it will be some time yet, possibly a year or so, before adequate water can be delivered to any large part of the project for agricultural purposes.

Meantime, in getting ready for the influx of settlers that will undoubtedly surge into that part of the country favorably affected by the advent of irrigation, New Mexico State and county officials as well as representatives of the various Federal government agencies, are already holding conferences and co-operating in the various problems connected with final, definite settlement plans. Several thousand acres of New Mexico State and school lands are included within the project. Other large tracts are at present privately owned. In many cases excess land agreements have been executed by these individual private owners providing for the disposition of all land in excess of a hundred and sixty acres in a single holding.

Irrigation projects of the Bureau of Reclamation, such as the one now being undertaken in the vicinity of Tucumcari, are fine things. In reality they are double-barreled enterprises. They afford present-day Americans the opportunity for the establishment of new homes, and at the same time aid materially in the modern development of the Western States.

Tucumcari is the county seat of Quay County, over near the eastern edge of New Mexico, up against the Texas Panhandle. It is right, smack-dab on one of the most famous and most heavily traveled of all main cross-country highways—U. S. 66.

J. K., of Pueblo, Colorado, reverses the order in his letter in this week's mailbag with a question about California, M. H.'s home State. Jim is interested in San Luis Obispo County, a grand Pacific coast region in the heart of the historic Mission Trails country halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco. Back from its miles of wave-lapped golden beaches San Luis Obispo County's beautiful hill country is also a land of ripening wheat and grazing white-faced Hereford cattle.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Larry sent Chihuahua sprawling but not before the Mexican let out a yell that gave away the attempted escape!

SATAN'S SOMBRERO

BY NORMAN A. FOX

THE pair edged silently into the Arrowhead Saloon and Larry McBride, sometimes called Larry Donovan, noted their entry with indifference. Sipping a beer at the shadowy bar, he saw that one was tall and string-thin, the other squat and swarthy, a Mexican. For a moment the latter claimed his curiosity. Montana's Dancing Creek range is a long way from the brimstone border, and there was something else about this Mex that marked him apart—a brooding madness in his squinted eyes.

Marijuana, Larry thought, and dismissed the matter. He'd never seen the pair before. He couldn't know they'd come to kill him.

Yet it was obvious that they were looking for somebody and Larry McBride was a man to stand out in any crowd. On this side of thirty, he was good-looking enough, a big, broad-shouldered man who carried himself with a certain arrogance

which befitted the overlord of this Dancing Creek range. For Larry was king here and he even wore a crown to prove it.

The crown was a peaked Mexican sombrero, ornately decorated but stained by age. Larry had inherited it from Gila Red McBride along with the McBride name and the vast McBride Tilted R spread. It had a history, that sombrero, and now a new chapter was about to be opened.

The strangers stood just inside the batwings, still blinking. But the Mexican's mad eyes were flitting from face to face, studying the half-dozen loungers at the bar. And suddenly his finger was aimed at Larry and his voice rose wildly.

"El Sombrero del Diablo!" he shouted and stabbed for his fancy-holstered gun.

Things happened fast, then. The second man's fingers darted to stop his companion. "No, Chihuahua—not now!" he protested but the Mexican was firing, a man berserk. The other, seeing that the die was cast, jerked his own gun and an astonished Larry found himself a target for both weapons.

One of Larry's own guns came into his hand almost instinctively. Leaping sideways as he fired, he felt the air lash of a bullet. That Mex was insane and firing like the madman he was. The other was therefore the most dangerous and Larry triggered his way, dropped the fellow.

But evening the odds had taken a precious second. And the Mex was more methodical now. He was deliberately sighting and Larry frantically tried to swivel his gun in time, chill with the conviction that he couldn't. But someone else was taking cards in the desperate game.

He was the last man Larry would have looked to for help. Most of the loungers were paralyzed by the swift pace of events but Joe Bisbee's gun was flashing. Joe Bisbee owned the little Lazy B spread back in the Hawkwing hills and he could shoot. His Colt spat and the Mexican's gun leaped, arced through the air. With a howl of thwarted hate, the Mexican dived through the batwings.

INSTANTLY the Arrowhead bar emptied, men stampeding to the porch. But the Mexican was mounted, galloping around a corner, his serape streaming behind him.

Larry chose to let him go. Men were bombarding him with questions but since he didn't know the answers he could only shake his head. He was conscious of Joe Bisbee's glance as that tall, tow-headed young rancher pouched his gun. Because there had been growing friction between the Tilted R and the Lazy B, Larry's embarrassment was acute.

"I'm obliged, Bisbee," he muttered.

"Don't be," Bisbee said and turned his back. "I'd have done as much for a flea-bitten dog."

Larry colored. He might have flared up but how could he show resentment toward a man who had just saved his life? Besides, curiosity tugged at him, a desire to know the why of that unexpected attack. And one man might have the answer.

Stone-faced, Larry tramped down the boardwalk, heading for Marias' only two-story building. At the top of a dark stairway he found a door marked "Caleb Thrush—Attorney at Law." Without knocking, Larry entered a littered office and planted himself before the man who was hunched over a pigeon-holed desk.

"I hanker," said Larry, "to see the part of Gila Red McBride's will which says I gotta wear this hat.

Caleb Thrush was as big as Larry, a bald, pink-faced man. Legal ad-

viser to all Dancing Creek, he was business manager for the Tilted R, a man with a knack for adding two and two and getting five. He raised nonexistent eyebrows in surprise but wordlessly went to a small safe from which he produced a legal form.

"Here it is," he announced. "' . . . Therefore since my son died in boyhood and my wife is also deceased, I have no legal heirs. For services rendered, I bequeath my entire holdings to Lawrence Donovan with the provision that he shall legally take my surname and will further perpetuate my memory by wearing the sombrero which has identified me always. Said sombrero is described as follows, to wit . . .'"

"Gila Red wrote that?" Larry demanded.

"I worded it for him," admitted Thrush. "That old hat was part of Gila Red. He wanted his successor to wear it. He didn't have an heir and you once snaked him out of Dancing Creek at flood time. Why are you so curious about it all of a sudden?"

"A Mex called Chihuahua is in town," Larry explained. "He took one look at this hat and started shootin'. Any idea why?"

Grayness crept into Thrush's pink cheeks. He folded the will mechanically.

"Yes," he said finally. "Gila Red told me. You see, about twenty years back Red was border-hopping, running cattle out of Mexico. He wore that sombrero then—"

"Yes," Larry encouraged.

"A Mexican, name o' Pablo Sanchez, black sheep of a fine Mexico City family, joined Red's crew. One night Sanchez raided on the Amer-

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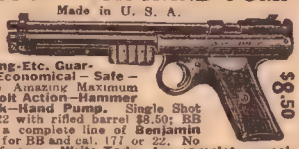

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ican side against Red's orders. When Red called him, the bunch jumped Red, gun-whipped him. They left him for dead, but he didn't die. He helped the Arizona Rangers corral Sanchez and the bunch went to Yuma pen.

"Gila Red was given full pardon for helping the Rangers," Thrush went on. "Not that Red was after amnesty. Afterwards he drifted north, settled here. He still wore his sombrero, the hat that rurales called *'El Sombrero del Diablo'*—Hat of the Devil. But when Red passed that hat on to you, he figgered his past was a long ways behind."

"I savvy," Larry said slowly. "Chihuahua is one of Sanchez's bunch. They escaped Yuma or served their time. They trailed Red here and they think I'm his son, seeing as I've got his name and hat. Why didn't you warn me? And what can we do about it?"

Caleb Thrush spread eloquent hands. "I saw no cause to worry you," he argued. "Gila Red completely reformed and that hat stands for something entirely different in Montana. It was Red's whim that you wear it, perpetuate the thing it now stands for. And since you're no blood kin of Red's, you couldn't break the will."

Larry frowned. Now he knew it all. Now he knew he'd inherited death when he had inherited the

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Tilted R. Gila Red McBride hadn't planned it that way but fate had reshuffled the deck.

"Don't worry," Thrush said soothingly. "You can hire gun guards. Besides, I've got good news for you! You've been hankering for the springs on Joe Bisbee's place. Well, they're practically yours. I had Bisbee's place re-surveyed on the sly. His boundary was recorded wrong. The springs are just west of his real line and therefore on government land. Have one of your boys file on it."

YESTERDAY such news would have made Larry exult over his luck. Today he felt a certain satisfaction that drove the menace of Sanchez momentarily from his mind but that satisfaction was clouded. Joe Bisbee had saved his life in Arrowhead. Somehow the idea of snatching the Lazy B springs from him didn't set as well as it should.

But an hour later, wending across the tawny rangeland to the Tilted R, Larry thought it over. Instinctively he was alert, knowing that danger shadowed him, but while his eyes and ears stood guard, his mind was free for other things. And in this manner he topped a bluff to look upon the palatial Tilted R ranchhouse—the citadel of his power.

His! His by a whim of Gila Red McBride's! His to build into even a greater thing—to spread and expand until no ranch was bigger than his ranch. Getting the Lazy B springs would help. And why shouldn't he take them? Was it his fault that Joe Bisbee had never checked on the legality of his boundary?

But in a matter of minutes Larry forgot about the Lazy B springs for as he rode to the ranchhouse to dismount near the corrals, one of his punchers handed him a sealed envelope.

"A Mex brought it," the waddy explained. "A gent dressed like he he was the president of Mexico hisself."

Apprehension stabbed Larry as he ran his thumb under the flap for the cowpoke's words told him that Pablo Sanchez himself had just visited the Tilted R.

The handwriting within was a thing of beauty, all curlicues and flourishes. It read:

My dear Senor McBride:

Because of your father I spent many years in Yuma prison—years of back-breaking labor. Since I'm informed that your father is now dead and cannot make restitution, I must content myself by exacting payment from you.

You will come, please, to the cabana in the Hawkwings which is the line shack of your own rancho. You will come alone and at once.

Should you fail to appear, there will be work for Señor Chihuahua whom you met today. Chihuahua is loco from too many years in Yuma, but he has not forgotten the art of making a man die slowly.

Your amigo, Señor Joseph Bisbee, is our unwilling guest. It was our good fortune to capture him after he left Marias. He goes free when you surrender yourself to us.

Otherwise—but why dwell on such unpleasantness?

Your obedient servant,
Pablo Sanchez.

Crushing that sardonic letter, Larry thrust it into his pocket, his mind whirling. So they had captured Joe Bisbee. They had assumed that Bisbee was his friend because he had taken cards at the Arrowhead. They were holding Bisbee, believing that Larry would surrender himself to save his friend. But why should he do any such thing? Death would be his lot if he rode to that line shack. He was Larry McBride, king of Dancing Creek range. He

was too important to sacrifice himself for a two-bit rancher.

Yet automatically Larry swung into the saddle again, faced toward the Hawkwings. He didn't take any of his crew with him, for the appearance of a force would seal Joe Bisbee's doom. He was doing a mad, insane thing in heading for the Hawkwings. But he was responsible for Joe Bisbee's predicament and something about the set-up reached through to the man who'd been Larry Donovan, a two-bit rancher who'd never ignored a neighbor's need. He cursed his soft-heartedness and mentally berated Joe Bisbee for letting himself be captured. But Larry plodded onward and when lengthening shadows paced horse and rider he was deep into the hills and nearing the outskirts of the Tilted R.

LARRY rode warily now and, nearing the shack, dismounted to steal through fir and scrub pine, skirting a moon-faced sentry who hunkered at the side of the trail. He had no intention of surrendering himself. If Sanchez had ridden all the way from Arizona solely for revenge, it was hardly likely that he would free the man who had sided Larry today.

And so, from a cluster of chokecherry bushes, Larry looked upon the line shack. Smoke eddied from its chimney and five horses, still saddled, were within the corral. One wore the Lazy B's brand. That meant there were three renegades inside the shack. As Larry watched, the door opened and a stubble-jawed man strode out with a platter of food, headed toward the nearby root cellar.

The fellow was gone all of fifteen minutes, returning with the plate empty. Larry needed no interpreter. That root cellar, used to store vegetables in the winter, was Joe Bisbee's prison.

Between Larry and the root cellar lay fifty feet of open space. Twilight was spreading its gray mantle but it wasn't dark enough. Larry began to worm forward, crawling Indian fashion, flattening himself at the slightest sound. Once a horse stomped nervously and a man came to the door for a moment. Larry lay still as death, scarcely daring to breathe. Inch by inch, he edged onward until he reached the door of the root cellar.

Hinges squeaked as Larry opened the door. He stiffened, his eyes on the shack. Then he boldly descended the wooden steps and struck a match, surveying the musty-smelling interior.

Joe Bisbee was lashed to the upright post that supported the cellar's roof. Larry saw the young rancher's eyes widen in astonishment in that single instant of light, then he was fumbling in the darkness, untying him. The knots were many and Larry had no knife. He worked for what seemed a frantic eternity and at last the ropes fell away.

Joe was free and they eased up the steps together, stepped into the open. It was as simple as that. But suddenly a figure bulked before them in the deepening gloom. And that figure found voice—shrill, startled—Chihuahua, the mad one!

Larry rushed him. His fist swung, cracked against the Mexican's jaw, sent him sprawling. Then Joe and Larry were speeding toward the corral. They reached it, piled into saddles, but Chihuahua's outcry had been heard. Two men came rushing from the cabin—the beard-stubbled man and a figure resplendent in garish garb—Pablo Sanchez.

They came with flaming guns but Larry didn't pause to send lead in return. Wheeling his horse, he headed for the shelter of a timber-fringed trail. Then with safety almost within sight, his horse squealed, buckled at the knees, went down bullet-riddled.

"Behind me!" Bisbee roared and extended his hand. Instantly Larry was straddling Joe's mount, clutching at the tow-headed rancher's belt. Then they were thundering down the trail, with lead spattering about them.

They were safe for the moment. But there were three horses and four men behind them and their own horse was carrying double. Drumming hoofbeats told them the renegades were coming.

Larry was letting Joe point the way. His own eyes were on the back trail and one of his guns was in his hand. But with a sudden consciousness that rocky walls flanked them, Larry started as he recognized their whereabouts.

"Lost Horse Canyon!" he gasped.

Joe Bisbee didn't know this country beyond the Tilted R. But Larry McBride had been in Lost Horse Canyon before and horror was in his voice. The canyon narrowed here to a bottle-neck pass and beyond it was a walled pocket—a dead end. Joe Bisbee had unwittingly headed them into a trap.

Larry shouted the truth into Joe's ear, was still shouting when Sanchez's men burst into view behind them. But now there were rocks for shelter and the two ranchers tumbled from the horse to hunker behind them. Silently Larry extended one of his guns to Joe and their first vol-

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ley sent Sanchez's crew out of saddles, scurrying to rocks.

AFTER that it settled down to a siege. Sometimes there was gunfire and always there was the insane shouting of Chihuahua who had glimpsed that hated sombrero again. But with the minutes marching the firing became desultory. Pablo Sanchez obviously knew his quarry was trapped and time would decide the issue.

Joe and Larry knew it too. They wasted no breath in discussion but each was casting his eyes about desperately. It was Joe who finally summed things up. "They can hold us here till we run out of lead," he said. "But why couldn't one of us keep 'em busy while the other sneaked back a piece, scaled the wall and went for help? Think it could be done?"

Larry eyed the wall dubiously. It looked glass smooth. "Might be worth a try," he conceded.

"Time's wastin'," Joe reflected. "Which one of us— But wait, I've got a coin—my lucky piece." He fished a half-dollar from his pocket. "Heads I wait—tails you do."

The coin flashed, landed spinning. Larry peered, then pocketed the coin. "Guess I'll need the lucky piece, seein' as I'm no bird," he said. "It's heads."

He would have moved away then but Joe spoke. "I don't rightly savvy all this," he said hesitantly. "Those jaspers told me they was

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goin' to hold me till you showed up, then kill us both. And—"

"Well?" Larry said impatiently.

"Shucks, I had you all wrong, McBride," Joe said. "You wanted my springs and you offered a fair-enough price, but you made your offer like you thought a man wouldn't dare refuse. I figgered your head was too big even for that Mex hat you wear. And I'd sure have bet you wouldn't show up at the shack. It certainly looks like I was wrong. I'd . . . I'd sorta like to shake—"

Larry took the proffered hand. He had no choice. Yet he felt guilty for he was not accepting Joe Bisbee's friendship wholeheartedly. Hang it, couldn't Joe understand that he'd had to come? Couldn't he savvy that tomorrow, his obligation discharged, Larry McBride would still be king of Dancing Creek, and Joe Bisbee would be a two-bit rancher who was in his way?

But there wasn't time for talk, so, stripping half his cartridges from his belt, Larry piled them beside Joe, then bobbed into the shadows. Around the first turn he paused at the base of the cliff, tested the wall for a foot hold.

He found one, pulled himself up, found another. Face skyward, he toiled upward, his mind closed against the thought of those dizzy depths below. His hands were bloody and perspiration blinded him. Gila Red's sombrero dangled by its throat latch and the weight of it seemed to grow, to pull him backward, as though that cursed hat was bound to be his undoing one way or another. But at long last his fingers closed on brush and he inched himself over the rim.

It hadn't been so tough, after all. Below, guns were barking intermittently, proof that Joe Bisbee still held Sanchez at bay. And with the hardest part of his assignment behind him, it occurred to Larry that he should have left the lucky coin with Joe. Joe had the hardest chore. He had to keep those guns busy, stall for time while Larry, danger behind him, headed for help.

It was incentive enough to send Larry trudging away. Walking, the greatest hardship that can befall a range man, was his lot. But walk he did, putting the miles behind, thrashing through underbrush, heading steadily downward.

LARRY wondered how Joe was faring. He wished he'd said a little more before he left. He wished he'd told Joe he wasn't such a bad fellow either. He wished—but doggone it, here he was getting soft-hearted again. Supposing Joe *was* holding off Sanchez? The flip of a coin had decided that, hadn't it?

Thus the two personalities who were Larry McBride waged a battle of sorts as he strode along. And that battle was still raging when he stumbled upon a little ranchhouse. Larry knew the place—Con Crawley's. Crawley was absent but his spare saddle horse was in the corral and gear was nearby. In a few minutes Larry was mounted.

Now there was a decision to be made. Marias was a few miles in one direction, the Tilted R ranchhouse an equal distance the other. Help could be had at either. It was six of one, half a dozen of the other so Larry wasted no time in speculation. He flipped Joe Bisbee's lucky coin and heads sent him racing toward Marias.

The coin was in his palm as he thundered along and in the light of the rising moon he absently turned it over. And suddenly Larry McBride was learning the meaning of

contrition. Joe's fifty-cent piece was one of those trick affairs—a double-headed coin. And Joe had called the turn. That meant Joe had chosen to stay behind. He had deliberately picked the dangerous chore for himself!

Why? There was only one answer. Joe Bisbee had decided that Larry McBride was a right sort of gent. He had been ashamed of himself and so, to make amends, he'd sent Larry to comparative safety while he himself stayed to face danger alone. He had done that for a man who didn't give a snap of his fingers for Joe Bisbee.

That's why it was the old Larry Donovan who found himself plying the quirt, squeezing speed out of Crawley's cayuse. That's why the miles of night-shrouded rangeland seemed endless and time stood still before he reached Marias. For suddenly the safety of Joe Bisbee had become the most important thing in the world to Larry McBride.

The hour was late and the street deserted but a light still burned in Caleb Thrush's office. It gave Larry a new idea and, leaping from the saddle, he pounded upstairs and into the office, a bloody, disheveled apparition that brought the lawyer to his feet in astonishment.

"Hell's a-poppin'!" Larry announced and told his story quickly. "You savvy?" he concluded. "Now rouse the sheriff. Have him ride for Lost Horse. Meantime I'm lopin' back that way alone—which same I should have done in the first place. Hurry!"

He'd given his order and he turned to the door. But he paused to face the astonished lawyer again. "That surveyor's report on Bisbee's place," he said abruptly. "Destroy it!"

Thrush's pink face twisted. "Destroy it?"

"Yes," Larry insisted. "Nobody but me and you knows the springs ain't really on Lazy B ground. Nobody's ever going to know different, Thrush."

HE turned again but once more he swung back. The thing that swiveled him this time was the audible click of a six-gun being cocked. Larry spun, and found himself facing a gun in Thrush's hand.

"What's going on?" he demanded bluntly.

"It's simple," Thrush said and grinned. "It means I've taken my last order from you. You don't savvy? With you dead I'll own the Tilted R. As business manager I can manipulate things to throw the spread into my own lap. I'd have killed you long ago only suspicion would have pointed my way when I took the ranch. Now Sanchez will be blamed. The whole town knows about that sombrero now."

And Larry, trapped, looked at this man who'd added two and two to get five and wondered why he hadn't suspected Thrush's duplicity before.

"You see, *I* wrote that business about the hat into the will," Thrush went on. "I couldn't change the entire will because Gila Red had told some of the folks around here you were his heir. And I sent to Arizona for Sanchez. Told him I'd pay him five thousand dollars to kill you. Since Sanchez hated the McBride name anyway, he came a-loping. He didn't get you but that won't matter now—"

His grin widened. "Yep, there'll be a new king shortly." He reached out and took Gila Red's sombrero from Larry's hand, and clapped it on his own head.

"How does the crown fit me?" he asked mockingly and his shadow bobbed on the drawn shade.

"Reckon old Red would turn over in his grave. You see, he wanted you to have the spread because you'd been a little gent and he figured you'd savvy the rights of other little fellers. He didn't know I'd sell you a few of my own ideas. Ready for a bullet, Mister King?"

And Larry was silent, for words wouldn't help now. But in that instant while Caleb Thrush's finger tightened on the trigger, Larry found time for a vast regret.

He was failing Joe Bisbee. And he'd failed Gila Red McBride, been untrue to the heritage that ex-outlaw had bequeathed him. He'd grown big-headed but actually he hadn't been half big enough to wear the hat of Gila Red.

THEN the whole scene went crazy before Larry's eyes for Caleb Thrush himself was pitching face forward—dead! And glass was tinkling on the floor and a gun was barking out in the street and the mad laughter of Chihuahua drifted through the broken window.

"I got heem!" the Mex was shouting. "I see hees sombrero on the weendow shade! I keeled heem!"

Sanchez and his men were out there! Sanchez had killed Joe Bisbee, or perhaps he had given up the siege. After all, Joe Bisbee's scalp was worth nothing while Larry's had a five-thousand-dollar bounty. Chihuahua, glimpsing the shadow-shape of that hated sombrero, must have fired instinctively. Larry snatched the fallen sombrero and started down the stairs gun in hand.

He met them halfway—Sanchez and Chihuahua, the beard-stubbled man and the moon-faced sentry. He met them joyously, eagerly, for they'd been Gila Red's enemies. He killed the bearded man as the fellow tilted his gun. And then lead was seeking Larry and the stairway

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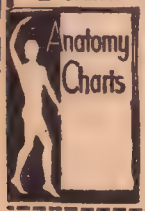

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echoed thunderously to the roar of guns.

He saw the moon-faced man wilt. Two guns were blazing almost in Larry's face and he felt the burning impact of their slugs. But his own six-shooter, spewing death, sent Chihuahua somersaulting backward down the stairs, his body bouncing grotesquely. Larry's knees were buckling and his strength was flowing from him. But, raising his gun, he sighted carefully, choosing a fancy button on the fancy vest of Pablo Sanchez. He knew Sanchez was still firing and some of that lead was thudding into him. But he carefully squeezed the trigger and Sanchez spilled backward, his face contorted.

Then it was over. Swaying, Larry stumbled over the bodies, staggered outside to gulp great mouthfuls of fresh air. It swept part of his nausea away but his senses were still reeling and he knew he must be delirious for he seemed to be seeing Joe Bisbee galloping up the street and swinging from a saddle.

"McBride!" Joe shouted and rushed to support Larry. "They figgered out our play, left me behind and headed for town. I found that hoss of yourn you'd hid behind the line shack. I've been right behind 'em all the way. I—"

"Pard," Larry said weakly. "Help me! Gotta—gotta find a sawbones to—"

Then Joe Bisbee's arm was around him and Joe was half-carrying him down the street. But Larry had one free hand and he adjusted Gila Red's sombrero upon his head. He'd learned that a king must be unselfish and even humble. From now on he was going to try and be the sort of gent who was fit to wear this age-stained crown—the right kind of king for Dancing Creek range!

THE END.

Part Six

TRAIL of the Thundering Herds

BY BENNETT FOSTER

The Story So Far:

Rusty Shotridge, a young cowpuncher, takes a job with the trail herd which is being sent to Dodge City by Colonel Watrous. From the start of the drive he is aware of tension, and his suspicions are aroused when Scott McBride, the trail boss, decides merely to earmark the herd instead of taking time to have it branded.

The drive goes along smoothly until the herd crosses the Red River into the Nations, wild, dangerous country where there is no law. Then the weather changes and one night when the herd is bedded down a storm breaks and the cattle stampede.

Next morning it is discovered that McBride has been killed in the stampede and that the Watrous cattle have run into the herd driven by Slippery Smith which has been following them up the trail. Leonard Carlisle, an inexperienced young Easterner who is part owner of the herd, decides to take over the job of trail boss, and appoints Honey Yates, one of McBride's trusted men, to help him.

The cattle is rounded up, cut into two herds and a count taken which, according to Rusty's tally, shows the Watrous herd five hundred head short. When Carlisle decides to call for another count, Yates and some of the other men on the crew go for their guns, prepared for a fight, but Rusty beats them to it and expels them from camp afoot. Eventually they find their way to Slippery Smith's herd and join up with him.

Forced by circumstances to take over as trail boss, Rusty continues the drive and eventually reaches Dodge City. Then, though his job is officially completed, he takes the trail after Slippery Smith and Honey Yates. Alone, he intends to face the rustlers and get back the stolen Watrous steers.

CHAPTER XX

TRAILING THE HACKAMORE

RAIN struck Rusty the second day out of Dodge City. The fall storm came slowly at first and then with increasing intensity. It was cold and penetrating, the wind blowing the rain down the collar of Rusty's slicker, drenching him. He went on through the rain and camped that night beside a swollen stream.

As he hobbled Toughy and turned him and Good Enough out together, Rusty noticed that even the short rest and the easy stages of his journey had freshened the two horses and let them put on a little flesh.

Unable to find dry wood for a fire, Rusty philosophically unrolled his bed in the shelter of a cottonwood thicket and turned in, totally unaware that some twenty miles behind him, three of his friends cursed the wet wood that refused to burn, and the rain that had washed out the tracks they followed.

The next morning Rusty went on toward the west, not hurrying, not pushing, but traveling steadily. There was a half-formulated plan in his mind. The word had been that Kansas, Gus, Chico and Red were following Slippery Smith and his herd. Somewhere in the west Rusty would find Slippery Smith. When he did that he would scout around the herd and eventually encounter Kansas and his fellows. That they would help him, Rusty had no doubt at all.

When that meeting was accomplished, Rusty, with his companions helping, would cut the Hackamore herd. The details of his plan were unperfected because they would depend on circumstances: but the plan itself was there, definite and unchangeable.

Rusty rode on, serenely confident, unworried, certain of his task. That he would meet danger, that death was possible, he knew, and disregarded the knowledge. Neither death nor danger deterred him. Rusty Shotridge had made up his mind. He had taken too much from Slippery Smith and Honey Yates and it was time to have an accounting. A new Winchester rode in the scabbard of Rusty's saddle; about his middle his Colt was strapped; and in his mind was that fixed determination, that cold, set purpose that only a strong man can feel. Slippery Smith and Honey Yates had lived too long. Perhaps they felt the same way about Rusty Shotridge. Somewhere ahead in Colorado or Wyoming or Utah, the three would meet and the dice would be thrown. Somebody would come riding out of it.

BEHIND Rusty—the distance greater now because of the storm and uncertainty—Tom Flanders and Bud Sigloe held consultation with Leonard Carlisle.

"Mebbe we'll find him an' mebbe we won't," Flanders stated bluntly. "It's like lookin' for a cow track in a marble quarry. There's a lot of country yonder"—he nodded toward the west—"an' Rusty's just one man in it. We had a chance while we could follow his tracks. Now we've lost 'em. What do you fellows think?"

Sigloe did not answer, but looked at Carlisle. This was a far different man than the youngster who had

started up the trail from San Ysidor. Carlisle's skin was tanned to the color of leather, and his eyes were wrinkled at the corners from looking into distances. The line of his jaw was clean and firm and definite, as were his words when he answered Tom Flanders.

"Maybe we'll stumble onto his trail," Carlisle said. "Anyhow, we'll find Smith. Rusty will be looking for Smith, and we'll look, too. It ought to be a lot easier to find a herd of cattle than to find one man."

Tom and Sigloe exchanged glances. Now they had the answer to a question that they had asked themselves. Both had wondered how far Leonard Carlisle would go.

"And I hope we find Smith before Rusty does," Carlisle completed.

"Yeah," drawled Bud. "So do I."

The three rode on toward the west. At ranches where they stopped, Tom Flanders asked questions, always the same questions—and always he received the same answers.

No, there hadn't been a trail herd through. Slippery Smith? Never heard of him. No, nobody had seen one man, traveling with a pack horse. Won't you fellows light an' stay the night with us? What's the news over east around Dodge City?

Now they dropped into the Dry Cimarron and traveled up its length. Flanders was familiar with the country and Bud Sigloe had once taken a herd north over the Goodnight Trail.

"If Slippery Smith has gone to Colorado, he'd have to use one of two passes. Either he went through Trinchera or the Raton Pass," Sigloe stated definitely. "So we'll find him at one place or the other."

Flanders nodded his agreement, and Carlisle added a word. "I hope," he stated, "that we're ahead of Rusty. That's what I hope."

Both Flanders and Sigloe nodded agreement. They joined with Leonard Carlisle in his wish, but they were afraid, very much afraid that Rusty was ahead of them and that they would be too late when they found Slippery Smith and the Hackamore herd.

The three turned north at the end of the wide valley of the Dry Cimarron. Climbing the long slope of Trinchera Pass, they dropped down the other side. There, below them, was the little village of Trinchera. Hoping against hope, they rode toward it.

Trinchera sprawled in the fall sunlight. There were horses at the hitch rails and dust in the single street.

"Mebbe"—Tom Flanders turned to his companions—"we'll get word here. We'll ask at some of the stores. Rusty would have had to stock up, an' anyhow they'll know if Smith come through the pass." He swung his horse toward a hitch rack and dismounted. His two companions wearily climbed down.

IN the first store part of Flanders' question was answered. The storekeeper had stocked a wagon for a trail herd, just the day before. The Hackamore wagon, the storekeeper said. Yes, the cook had definitely named his outfit. No one, said the man behind the counter, had come to town except the cook.

To Flanders' second question the merchant answered "no." He had not seen one stranger in town, one man traveling alone. There were four strangers in Trinchera, all in a bunch, and, oddly, they had asked the same questions. The storekeeper looked at Flanders, curiosity showing in his eyes. Flanders wheeled to consult his companions.

"Four men," he said. "Now I wonder—"

"Does it make any difference?" Carlisle demanded. "We know that the Hackamores have been through here. They're north of us. Rusty hasn't been in this town. It's too small for any stranger to get through without being seen. I wish—" A nameless dread showed in Carlisle's eyes and was likewise reflected in the eyes of his companions. The Hackamore herd had come across Trinchera. Had Rusty Shotridge met the Hackamore below the pass?

"Let's get out of here," Flanders said suddenly.

They left the store and, standing in front of it, held a consultation. There were two other stores in Trinchera and on the chance that Rusty had patronized one of these, investigation was indicated. In a group, the three men walked on to conduct their search.

Their inquiries at the other two stores brought no results and once more they held a short parley.

"We'll go on," Carlisle announced finally. "We know that Smith has been through here and we know that Rusty hasn't. Either we're ahead of him or not. If we're ahead—"

Leonard Carlisle broke off. Four men, a lanky individual in the lead, were approaching the three along the walk. The quartet stopped and the lanky man drawled comment: "Folks say that yo're lookin' for the Hackamore herd. That right?"

Flanders' eyes were sharp as he surveyed the questioner. "Yeah," he answered. "What of it?"

Carlisle spoke quietly. "Hello, Kansas. How are you, boys?"

Sigloe and Flanders relaxed. Kansas, advancing, extended his hand to Carlisle. "We're fine," he said. "Are you lookin' for Rusty, too?"

Carlisle nodded.

"So are we," Kansas said. "I sent him word in Dodge City. Did he get it?"

"He got it," answered Carlisle. He turned to Flanders. "Tom, I want you and Bud to meet these men. This is Kansas—Red—Chico—Gus—Mr. Sigloe and Mr. Flanders."

Hands were shaken gravely. Kansas looked Tom Flanders up and down and a slow grin broke across his face. "You needn't worry about Rusty," he drawled. "He ain't reached the Hackamore yet. Not up to last night, he hadn't. We been watchin' 'em an' lookin' for him, too. Let's get some place where we can talk."

CHAPTER XXI

SMOKE-POLE SHOWDOWN

BROODING eats the heart out of a man. Brooding may make him mad. And Honey Yates brooded endlessly as day stretched into day. He had no weapon of his own and about him armed men rode. He had no defense and daily he was subjected to torment. No man falls so low as one who has occupied a peak. Honey Yates, known and feared from the border north, had fallen. Constantly he was the butt of the rough humor, the rawhiding of his companions, but it was the malicious lash of Slippery Smith's tongue that drove him to the brink of insanity. Never a day passed by but that Smith applied that lash, never a night fell but that Yates harbored some fresh cut in his mind.

Once he rebelled, snatching out his pocketknife, flashing it open and springing to the attack. That attack stopped short before the muzzle of a Colt and Smith's hard laughter. It gained Yates nothing save the loss of his knife.

Other, lesser, men would have quit. Other men, riding on guard

about cattle in the night, would have turned their horses and spurred away. Not Honey Yates. Hatred held him up. Hatred seared but strengthened him. Honey Yates, brooding, was filled with an idea. There were two things he must do, two things he would do: kill Slippery Smith and, when that was accomplished, find and kill Rusty Shotridge.

It is difficult to understand such a man as Honey Yates. From youth he had lived by death. A boy of eighteen, he had killed a man in a cow camp east of El Paso. He had run from that killing. The next year, working in the Territory, he had killed again. The protection of his employer had kept him from flight, but he had purchased that protection by another murder. After that the taste of blood was in Yates' being. His career, founded on death, had continued. He was a wolf loose in a sheep pen, a rabid dog loosed among lambs. How could Honey Yates do other than kill? It was his one answer, his one retort.

Slippery Smith knew these things and chose to play with Yates. There are some men who will torment a crippled rattler, enjoying the rage of their victim, enjoying the tortured coiling of the snake and its crazy lunges, enjoying the very idea of the death that lurks in the fangs. Slippery Smith was such a man, and, like the tormentor and the snake, he intended to kill his plaything in the end.

Slippery Smith's herd, including six hundred and ninety head of big steers, their right ears grubbed close to the head, a Hackamore burned across their noses, and bearing a big LM on their left flanks, moved west and then turned north. The crew, bribed by a promise of a division of spoils, was content and even happy. Moreover, there was entertainment

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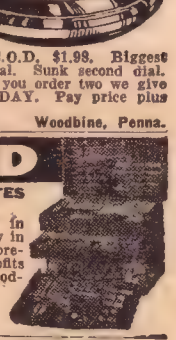

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in the camp, a constant play, and their savage natures enjoyed it. They were fascinated by the play. Some day, somewhere along the trail, Honey Yates would die. That was the play and the fascination.

DRIVING north, the herd reached the Dry Cimarron and crossed it. Through the long pass that the natives had dubbed Trinchera, the cattle took their way. Above the pass they went on north, approaching a possible market, and as the end of the trail came closer, so too came the end of the drama. There was no question of it. Smith's tongue ever grew more rasping, his words more hateful. Under them a man must break, and when Honey Yates broke, the drama would be finished. Every man with that herd knew it, every man anticipated it, including Honey Yates. And Yates not only knew it, he looked forward to it. There was a guard about him, watchful eyes were always on him. On the third day above Trinchera Pass, that guard relaxed fractionally, and on that day, late in the evening, Honey Yates acquired a weapon.

Yates' acquisition of a gun was a lucky accident. The country above Trinchera was rough. Crossing an arroyo, the chuck wagon lurched, struck a rock and broke a wheel. The wagon went on over on its side, for the front wheel at the time was cramped sharp to make a turn in the ascent. Food, beds, cooking utensils, all the thousand and one things with which the wagon was loaded, came tumbling out.

Honey Yates was in the drag of the herd. He did not see the catastrophe but he heard the cook yell. With Sam accompanying him, he left the cattle and loped over to see what had happened to the wagon. He was on the ground, helping straighten things out, when Smith arrived.

Slippery cursed the cook and

pitched in to help effect repairs. After the wagon had been set up and lifted until the bed was level, a pole was brought and lashed under the rear axle and to the front axle.

With the pole acting as a wheel, the crossing of the arroyo was completed and Smith loped back to the still traveling herd while Sam and Honey Yates helped the cook reload.

It was now that opportunity knocked for Honey Yates. He was helping Sam heave the beds up to the cook. In handling the beds, Honey felt the hard outline of a gun through a canvas tarpaulin. He managed to leave that bed until last. The cook called Sam to give him a hand, and while Sam was gone, Honey reached into the loosely lashed bed and acquired the pistol.

Of all the men in the crew, Yates was the only one that wore chaps. He had clung to them throughout all the journey. Now he was thankful he had done so. There was a pocket in the chaps and into it Yates thrust the gun before Sam returned. The flap of the chaps effectually hid the bulged-out pocket and the gun was safe.

With the loading completed, the two riders left the cook to his own devices and as they rode, the gun rubbed comfortingly against Honey's leg. His eyes were narrow with savage satisfaction. Now, when opportunity presented itself, he would settle with Slippery Smith. He would not make that settlement openly and boldly, but as occasion offered. Honey Yates had set himself a task and he would not accomplish one portion of it at the expense of the other. He wanted to kill Smith and get away so that he might kill again.

The Hackamore outfit camped that night close to a piñon thicket. The cattle were bedded and the camp made by sundown. As usual, Slippery Smith found occasion to lash out at Yates, and as usual Yates took the cursing in sullen silence. Routine was in force at the Hackamore wagon. By dark the men were ready for bed and the cook had finished with the dishes. Honey Yates pulled his bed well away from all the rest. He took off his chaps and his hat and turned in. Under his thin pillow the gun lumped wickedly.

For a long time Yates remained awake. He hoped that the night would bring the opportunity he wanted, but it did not. Smith was restless. He was up and out with the cattle most of the night. Only —and here grim humor played a part—he did not visit the herd while Yates was on guard, and when Yates came in Smith was on the way out with the relief. So, all during the night, there was no chance for Honey to use his weapon. He did not worry. His revenge was not averted; it was simply delayed. Returning from his guard he went to sleep.

In the morning the Hackamore outfit moved as usual, the cattle strung out, the wagon and remuda paralleling the line of the herd. Slippery Smith rode at one point, Sam at the other. Behind Sam, in the swing, Honey Yates held his position. All that morning they moved and, at noon, the cattle spread out to graze.

In mid-afternoon the march resumed and once more the riders fell in place. The sun sloped west toward the Spanish Peaks and the evening breeze was cool as the cattle followed up a long, piñon-flanked hollow.

Noting movement among the piñons, Slippery Smith rose in his stirrups. Then, with a surprised grunt, he dropped back into his saddle and, his hand rising, touched the butt of the gun at his waist. There

was a man coming out of the piñons, riding deliberately down the slope. Slippery Smith recognized the rider. It was Rusty Shotridge!

RUSTY had missed the way. Unfamiliar with the country, he had struck too far north after the rain instead of following the easy passage of the Dry Cimarron. Striking the north fork, he followed along it, stopping occasionally at ranches and small crossroad stores to ask casual questions, identifying the country through which he traveled, locating himself and learning that there had been no herds through. He learned, too, that there were but two passages on the western trail: Trinchera and Raton. Through one of these the Hackamore outfit must come.

Rusty spent a night at a Block Ranch line camp on the Chiquaque and there received his first definite information concerning the Hackamore herd. There was another stranger stopping at the camp and from him Rusty learned that the Hackamore outfit had come through Trinchera Pass the day before and was moving on north.

Leaving the line camp the next morning, Rusty rode west. Somewhere close to the Hackamore herd he would find Kansas and his companions. Deciding upon Trinchera town as the most likely place, Rusty made for that little village.

He reached Trinchera in the morning, having made a camp between the Block Ranch and the town. Riding in, Rusty stopped by a hitch rack, dismounted, tied his horses and began some discreet questioning. Knowing Kansas and his companions, Rusty sought out the bartender of Trinchera's principal saloon.

The bartender responded to Rusty's cautious pumping. A saloon in that Western country was a club, a newspaper and a meeting place. Whatever went on in the town or in the country about was sooner or later retailed at a saloon, and Rusty's bartender gave information. The Hackamore trail herd had been through Trinchera, he informed Rusty. It had passed the town—he paused and pondered—two, no, three days ago. Rusty nodded his satisfaction and pursued his inquiry.

The bartender eyed Rusty curiously. He had seen some strangers in town, he said. Four of them. Rusty brightened. Come to think of it, the bartender continued, those four strangers had been asking about one man, traveling alone.

"They were lookin' for me," Rusty announced. "Are they still in town?"

The bartender shook his head. "They pulled out," he announced. "They was in here an' there was some other fellows showed up. Officers, I guess. I didn't see 'em but from what I heard that's what they were. I guess those four that were lookin' for you didn't want to meet the others. Anyhow they left." The bartender's eyes were very bright as he examined Rusty.

Rusty nodded, thanked the man and left the saloon. That bartender, Rusty knew, thought that he, Rusty Shotridge, was on the dodge. He thought that Kansas and his friends were on the dodge, too. It would not take him long to get hold of an officer. Rusty walked out to the hitch rail and untied his horses. He wanted no difficulty with the law in Trinchera and he wanted no delay. Kansas, Red, Gus and Chico were not in town. They were gone. Rusty wondered who the other men might be. They could be, and probably were, officers following Kansas

and his friends. That was entirely logical. Rusty stepped up on Big Enough and, leading Toughy, headed out of town toward the north.

AS he rode, Rusty considered his predicament and his plan. The men he had counted on for help were gone. They were, Rusty surmised, looking after their own hides. But north of him was the Hackamore herd and with that herd were Slippery Smith and Honey Yates and five hundred big LM steers carrying a grubbed ear for a trail brand. And here was Rusty Shotridge. He had come a long way to cut the Hackamore herd. Rusty's jaw firmed. He'd cut it!

All the remainder of that day Rusty traveled steadily, keeping Big Enough at a steady saddle gait, covering country. No use to save his horses now; he was almost at the end of his journey. No use to hold back. He stayed to the east of the trail plainly marked in the grassy country. He passed the camps and the bed grounds that the Hackamore had made and, unknowingly, he passed his friends.

West of the trail Tom Flanders, the recognized head of the group, led his followers. And Flanders had no more idea that Rusty was to the east, than Rusty had of Flanders' presence west of him. So, as the day drew to an end, Rusty Shotridge marked the thin line of dust—emblem of marching cattle—and, swinging west, came across the line of march. And so too, as day closed, Tom Flanders spoke to his men.

"We'll pass 'em in the mornin'."

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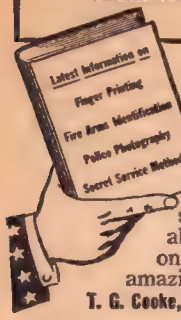

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he said. "Then we'll come ridin' down an' cut the herd." His grim-faced companions nodded agreement to the plan.

"I want the horses fresh an' I want to surprise 'em," Flanders continued. "They're not two miles ahead of us now. We'll camp tonight. Tomorrow will be soon enough."

Again the others nodded assent and Carlisle spoke. "We can look 'em over this evening when they bed down," he said. "That will give us some idea of what we're up against."

"Let's ride on a little then," Flanders commanded.

The party moved along, horses walking, men lounging in their saddles. Ahead of them the dust rose up from the trail herd, close, just across the low hills.

"We might—" Bud Sigloe began. "Hey, wait a minute! What was that?"

The men reined in. Faint across the distance came a sound, low, reverberating, rolling.

"That's a shot!" Tom Flanders said quickly. "I—"

"There's another!" Sigloe shouted the words and spurred his horse. Behind him the others lifted their mounts from walk to run.

"I sure hope that ain't Rusty," Sigloe shouted. "Come on, Tom. Come on!"

RUSTY came steadily down the slope toward the leaders and Slippery Smith. Across the thin line of cattle he could see Honey Yates spurring forward. The sight of those two men swept away the last vestige of caution from Rusty's mind. Here were the men he had come to find, the men who had tricked him, who had tried to kill him, the men who had lived too long. This was the end of the trail, this little piñon-clad valley where the dust of the herd rose up.

Rusty dropped Toughy's lead rope

and the horse, freed, stopped, watching Big Enough carry his rider on. Smith was coming out from the herd toward Rusty and, circling across in front of the leaders, came Sam and Honey Yates. Yates passed Sam, and Smith was close. Rusty reined Big Enough to a stop.

"Hello, Smith," he said casually.

Slippery Smith stopped his horse. Yates had pulled down from run to trot and was close behind Slippery Smith now. Rusty watched him. It would not do to let these two separate. He must keep them together where he could watch them both.

"What's on yore mind, Shotridge?" Smith drawled. "Yo're quite a ways from Dodge City, ain't you?"

"Quite a ways." Rusty's drawl was as smooth and soft as the other's. "You've got five hundred LM steers of mine, Smith. I've come to cut yore herd."

Yates had reined in now, close to Slippery Smith, and Rusty's swift glance noted the snarling mask of hatred on Yates' face. Yates' hand was hidden on his right and Rusty, knowing what was coming, caught Big Enough with rein and spurs and swung him to the left. As the horse moved, Rusty's hand went up to the gun at his hip. It had come, then. This was the showdown!

Yates' hand rose from concealment. Smith was reaching for his gun, and Sam was pulling his horse to a halt and also reaching. Yates' hand came out and up and, from across his body, he fired one shot.

Honey Yates was not three feet from Slippery Smith when he fired. The lead plowed through ribs and lungs and heart and Smith pitched down from his frightened horse, his right foot catching in the stirrup. The horse whirled and ran, dragging the body, kicking to free itself from its gruesome burden. Then Honey Yates, swinging the gun around, screamed at Rusty Shotridge:

"You get the same, dammit!"

Yates' gun was up and level. Rusty could not hope to beat the shot even though his own weapon was in his hand. He was out of position, out of line. He lifted Big Enough once more with spurs and rein, and the sorrel came around, throwing his head high. As the horse swung, Yates' gun exploded.

It was Big Enough that took the slug. His head had come in line and the bullet crashed into the blaze of his face. The sorrel went down like a pole-axed steer and Rusty, dropping with the horse, thrust out his feet and struck upon them, the horse squarely between his forked legs. Yates had gone on by and Sam was shooting, his horse whirling and fighting his rider. From along the frightened cattle, men were coming, their horses running full out. Rusty, wheeling, turning his body, followed Yates with his weapon. Once, twice, three times the heavy gun bounced and dropped level again, and Honey Yates, flinging his arms wide, reeled on his running horse and pitched free of the saddle.

DROPPING the Colt, Rusty reached down and snatched the Winchester from the saddle boot, jumping free of Big Enough as the horse went over on his side and lay kicking. As Rusty came up with the carbine, a shot struck him, whirling him half around as it smashed into his left shoulder. Rusty dropped down to his knee, brought up the carbine and fired once. Sam had emptied his weapon with his shot and with Rusty's bullet singing by his ear, he turned his horse and fled.

The other riders were rapidly approaching and the steers, frightened

by the shooting and the sudden action, were streaming past at a lumbering run. Rusty flung a shot from the carbine after Sam, levered the gun and sighted again. Once more he fired and a horse, running hard, broke stride as though tripped, pitched down on head and neck, sending his rider sailing.

A Hackamore rider reined in beside the fallen horse. Others, fanning out at a distance, came on. Rusty levered the Winchester again and raised it, taking careful aim. Seven shots in the carbine and he had used three of them! He was on the ground, hurt but a fighting man, and toward those circling riders he flung his defiance.

"Come on, you! Come on!"

Back beside the fallen horse, the Hackamore rider yelled. Shots pattered about Rusty, singing close, vicious and whining as they ricocheted, and then the circling riders broke and wheeled away, and beyond the cattle Rusty saw riders streaming down a slope and shouting as they came.

Rusty surveyed the apparition through red-rimmed, dust-blinded eyes. Surely he knew those riders. He shook his head and lifted his left hand to his eyes, disregarding the pain the movement brought. That man in the lead, that man sweeping down toward him, was Leonard Carlisle. It could not be true, but it was. Carlisle! What was he doing here? And there was Kansas and there was Tom Flanders and Bud and little Chico and Gus and grinning Red.

Rusty lowered the carbine and took a step. His toe struck an obstruction and, looking down, he saw Big Enough's big hip. Weakly he sat down upon that hip while Flanders and Sigloe and Red went streaming by. And then Leonard Carlisle slid his horse to a stop and leaped from his saddle. His voice was harsh and filled with anxiety as he called:

"Rusty, are you all right?"

There on Big Enough's unmoving flank, Rusty looked up uncomprehendingly at his questioner. "He killed Smith," he said, his eyes wide. "Just pulled his gun an' shot him."

"Easy, Rusty," Carlisle ordered. "You're hurt. Here comes Bud, and Tom is right behind him. Easy now. Let me look at you."

CHAPTER XXII

TRAIL'S END

THEY camped that night beside Slippery Smith's wagon. Save for Rusty, not a man had been hurt. The Hackamore cattle were scattered over half of Colorado, so Bud Sigloe said, and it would be a chore rounding them up. There might be other chores, too, he intimated, and looked grimly at a man tied to a wagon wheel.

Of all the Hackamore outfit only that one captive was left. The others, even the cook, were scattered to the wind. The charge that Tom Flanders had led had been too much for the Hackamore. With Slippery Smith dead, with Honey Yates down, with Sam gone, fleeing pell-mell from stuttering, vengeful guns, the Hackamore had no stomach for more fighting. Two of their number they had left upon the field: one dead, the other unhorsed by Rusty's shot.

Rusty Shotridge camped in peace that night and, despite the wound in his shoulder, slept the long hard sleep of exhaustion. Not so the others. They sat around the fire and talked in low voices, now and again glancing at their sleeping comrade with awe and respect in their eyes.

"He was goin' to handle it by himself," Kansas said once, nodding toward Rusty. "All by himself."

"He about had the job done, too," Sigloe commented. "He was down mebbe, but he was a long ways from bein' finished when we come in."

The others nodded soberly. Over by the wagon wheel the captive spoke his defiance. "We'd have got him if it hadn't been for you fellows—"

"You'd have got hell!" Tom Flanders said curtly, and the captive lapsed into silence.

In the morning Carlisle and Sigloe rode to Trinchera. They were back before night and with them came a lanky, tobacco-chewing deputy sheriff. The deputy got down, shook hands with Flanders, Rusty and his fellows, and strode over to the Hackamore man. It was immediately apparent that cow thieves were no more popular in Colorado than they were in Texas.

Under the deputy's persuasion the Hackamore rider talked. Nay, he more than talked; he babbled. And when the story was done the deputy turned to Flanders and nodded thoughtfully.

"I reckon that settles it," he drawled. "The boss'll be out from Trinidad tomorrow an' he'll have some questions to ask, but I reckon I got the answers for him."

In the morning the sheriff from Trinidad did arrive and, as his deputy had foretold, had questions to ask. Once more the Hackamore rider told his tale and again Rusty, abetted by Flanders, Carlisle, Sigloe, and the others, answered questions. The Colorado sheriff listened gravely and pronounced judgment.

"Too doggone bad," he stated bluntly, "that you didn't get 'em all. I reckon that was too much to expect though."

Under the sheriff's orders the work of rounding up began. The sheriff

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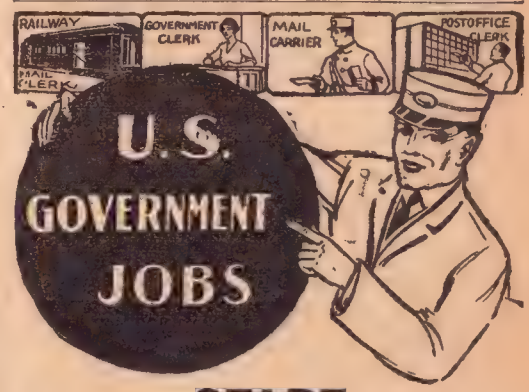

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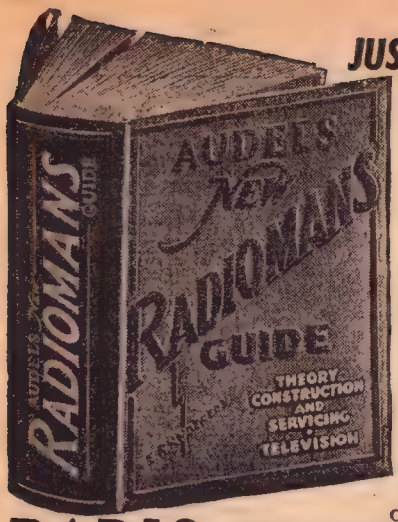

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had brought two men with him and these helped in the task of gathering Hackamore cattle. Rusty, with Chico—who admitted that he could cook a little—remained at the camp, Rusty in charge of the remuda. For three days the work went steadily forward and on the fourth day the sheriff was satisfied.

"I guess we got 'em all," he pronounced. "Now what did you want to do?"

It was Rusty who answered that. "I came this far to cut 'em; that's what I'm goin' to do."

The sheriff, after a long survey of the speaker, nodded agreement. Like a good many officers, he was both the law and the court. "Cut 'em then," he directed.

SO with the sunshine bright upon him and the fall air crisp, disdaining the ache in his wounded arm, Rusty cut the herd. Kansas helped him and the others held the herd and the cut. When he was finished, Rusty rode out to the sheriff.

"They're clean," he reported.

There was much still to be done. Every man there knew it. While Kansas and his friends, in company with the deputies, held the cattle separate, the sheriff talked with Carlisle, Tom Flanders, Rusty and Sigloe. A plan was made and agreed upon.

"Likely it ain't legal," the sheriff said doubtfully, "but it's sense. Let's get at it."

The plan was not lawful but it was sensible. A court would tie up the Watrous cattle as well as all the rest. That was the thing they all sought to avoid. So Carlisle accompanied the sheriff and his prisoner when they departed for Trinidad, and Rusty and his companions stayed with the herd.

Carlisle was gone a day and two nights. When he returned there was a local ranchman with him. The

local man inspected the Watrous steers, a bargain was struck and a bill of sale and a draft exchanged.

"You can drop 'em here," the man told Carlisle. "This is my range an' I'll have my riders shift them where I want them. There'll be no kickbacks on this deal, Carlisle?"

"No kickbacks," Carlisle assured him.

According to the sheriff's wishes, the remainder of the Hackamore herd was shifted nearer Trinidad. Three days were used in accomplishing that movement and at the end of the third day the sheriff came out again to meet the cattle. He drew Flanders apart and the two rode together while the herd moved on slowly. When camp was made, the sheriff put a proposition to the party.

"I've got to hold these cattle here until the court does something with 'em," he announced. "I can't spare any of my reg'lar deputies for the work an' I've got to hire some men. I wonder where I could get 'em?" He glanced guilelessly at Kansas. Tom Flanders, too, was watching the lanky man, as were Carlisle and Rusty.

Kansas began to grin. He looked at Chico, at Gus and Red and then at the officer. "You'd need about four?" he asked.

"About four," the sheriff agreed.

"I guess we could accommodate him, couldn't we, Chico?" Kansas asked. Chico nodded.

In the morning there were good-bys. Kansas and his friends were staying with the cattle; Rusty and his companions were going to town with the sheriff. Rusty shook hands all around. There was no way to thank these men, his friends. They had come to him when he needed them most and they had gone through.

"You boys," Rusty said to Kansas, and there was a choke in his voice, "will do to ride the river with. That's all I can say. I reckon—"

"Aw, hell," Kansas blurted, and his voice, too, was strained, "you ain't so bad yourself."

So they parted, Rusty riding away with his friends, Kansas and Red, Gus and Chico remaining with the herd.

Rusty looked back when they had gone a hundred yards and Kansas, beside the wagon, lifted his arm in farewell. Rusty answered the gesture and then turned away. Somehow the country ahead was blurred to his vision. The sheriff was riding beside Rusty and he stated:

"There's cow thieves an' cow thieves. Them boys ain't wanted here in Colorado an' I'll keep 'em busy till spring comes 'round. You'll see 'em again, son. They'll look you up. You can't lose them kind of friends."

IN Trinidad there was more detail to attend to. Before a justice of the peace Rusty, Flanders, Carlisle and Sigloe made statements that were notarized. Tom Flanders' reputation smoothed the way and made things easy, and the sheriff talked with the county attorney. Back east of Trinidad, north of Trinchera, there were three graves. Honey Yates lay in one, Slippery Smith in another, and a nameless rider in the third. The statements before the justice explained those graves. There was law in Colorado and in the West, but there was a certain philosophy, too. "Good riddance of bad rubbish," the West said.

So finally the legal labyrinth was gotten through and there was nothing more to hold the men. They bade good-by to their friend the sheriff, promising that they would

see him again and urging that he visit them, and a full two weeks after the swift action that had finished Honey Yates and Slippery Smith, the four rode out of the little town beside the Picketwire River.

Over Raton Pass they went and then east, across the Chico Hills. As they rode, Rusty Shotridge was moody and given to long silences. His shoulder was almost healed and pained him but little, but his mind was not at rest.

They rode steadily east, sometimes making camp beside a stream, sometimes utilizing the hospitality of a ranchhouse or line camp, and as they traveled on, Rusty's companions watched him, sensing his mood and not able to explain it.

One by one, they tried to help him. Tom Flanders spoke quietly of his job in Dodge City and intimated that he could still use a good deputy. Rusty gave Tom no answer. Bud Sigloe, in turn, suggested that Ad Marble could use another trail boss, or that, should Rusty wish, he could take a place in Sigloe's crew. Rusty thanked him and parried the offer. Then well along the road to Dodge City, Leonard Carlisle took his turn.

There was a bond between Rusty and Carlisle now, an unbreakable tie. They had fought and hated each other but each had proved himself a man. Carlisle, riding beside Rusty, blurted out the thing that was on his mind.

"What's wrong?" he demanded abruptly.

"Nothing," answered Rusty. "There's nothing wrong, Leonard."

That was not true and Carlisle knew it. Still he did not refute the statement. "I've held off talking to you," he said. "I wanted Colonel Watrous to tell you about this, but I guess I'd better do it myself."

"Tell me what?" Rusty demanded.

"Colonel Watrous and I are partners," Carlisle said. "We've made some money on this herd. We'll stay in partnership."

Rusty nodded, wondering what was coming next.

"I've got another idea," Carlisle continued. "I think that we can make more money if we raise our own cattle. I think we need a breeding ranch and I'm prepared to put up the money to buy one."

Rusty looked at his companion with surprise. Carlisle was talking sense but Rusty wondered where he himself fitted in. Why was Carlisle telling him all this? Carlisle smiled quietly.

"We'll probably pick a place in Colorado or New Mexico," he explained. "Texas is crowded with cowmen and we'll need more room than we can find there. Next year we'll be trailing stock cattle to a new home."

There was a pause and then Carlisle continued: "I want you to bring those cattle up the trail, Rusty. And I want you to run the outfit that we'll buy. No, wait a minute!" He held up his hand, checking Rusty's speech. "We'll make you some kind of a proposition, the colonel and I. We want you with us, Rusty, as a partner. How about it?"

For a long instant Rusty did not answer. Then, meeting Carlisle's eyes squarely, he said: "You don't want me, Carlisle. I—you don't want me."

"Why not?"

"Because—" Rusty said uncomfortably. "I . . . Marcia—"

A slow smile spread over Leonard Carlisle's face, becoming a wide grin of delight. "So that's it?" he exclaimed. "We all wondered what had got into you. Here you pull off a stunt that would make any man

proud, and you've been going around glum as an ox. So that's it!"

"I'm in love with her," Rusty said stubbornly. "I'm not in her class. One time I thought—"

Leonard Carlisle's hand came down on Rusty's injured shoulder and closed. Rusty did not even feel the pain, for Carlisle was speaking quietly:

"Marcia sent me after you, Rusty. She sent me to bring you back to her. Do you understand?"

THE trail was long now, for Rusty was eager. Day crawled into day and the miles were no longer miles but distances that had no end. Still, long as was the trail and endless as were the miles, there came a day when as they rode, the four men saw smoke against the sky and under the smoke a black clump that, growing nearer, resolved itself into buildings.

"Dodge City," Tom Flanders said, and urged his weary horse to a swifter pace.

The smoke came nearer and the buildings grew larger. Presently they were riding through streets. Beside the Drovers Hotel they stopped and dismounted, tying their saddle horses and pack animals to a convenient hitch rack. Stiffly, as men move who have spent a long time in

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the saddle, they rounded the corner of the building.

Colonel Watrous was on the porch, smoking. His feet were on the porch rail, his chair was tipped back and his hat lowered over his eyes. The ashes from his cigar dropped on his vest and the colonel languidly brushed them away. He had just completed the gesture when he saw the travelers. Then his feet struck the floor with a thump and he sprang up, with a bellow of greeting.

The quartet paused just below the hotel steps. Watrous came charging down the steps, his hand outstretched. He caught Carlisle's hand, reached for Rusty, and words came tumbling from his lips, incoherent in his eagerness. Ellen Watrous appeared in the doorway and Carlisle, freeing himself from the colonel, went to her. On the porch he held her in his arms, all the world forgotten, and Ellen's red hair was pressed against his breast. Rusty, watching, was happy for his friend.

Watrous had released Rusty and gone on to Sigloe and Flanders. He was pummeling them, almost overwhelming them with his greeting. Then, behind the two on the porch there was movement. Marcia Carlisle appeared in the doorway of the hotel and paused. Rusty took a step forward and stopped. There she stood, the girl who had been constantly with him, the girl who, no matter what happened, would be with him all his life. He could not go to her. He stood waiting.

For an instant Marcia stood in the doorway, her eyes, dark as Rusty remembered them, searching the porch, the steps, and the scene before her. Then, moving swiftly, she passed her brother and Ellen and reached the steps. Her arms were spread wide and her voice was glad as she cried one word: "Rusty!"

She ran down the steps to him.

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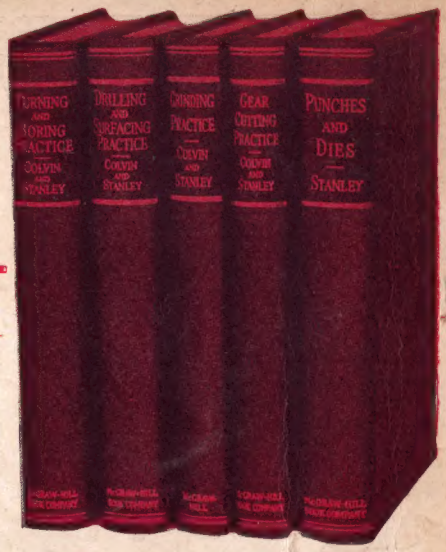

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